

TITLE: The PROPELS Revolution and Evolution: Peer Mentoring for Retention and Leadership Development

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Abstract

In this paper, we describe how we used best practices of peer mentoring and student leadership in order to help students from underserved populations retain, progress, and complete their community college potential and move on to high-wage employment.

Students enrolled in “Transitional Studies” classes at Everett Community College are either non-native speakers of English and/or students who do not have a high school credential. While the intention of the instruction is that students will improve these skills and gain these credentials, the data indicates that only 9% of students transition to college-level classes.

A promising intervention for these students, called the PROPELS student mentoring program, was introduced. PROPELS, which stands for Peers Reaching Out to Promote Education and Learning Success, provides additional support for students with achieving academic and personal goals. PROPELS incorporates the Servant Leadership Theory (Greenleaf, 1970) and Kolb’s Theory of Experiential Learning (Kolb, 1984) as frameworks. In addition, its activities are designed based on social justice and modeling role plays.

PROPELS has also been a nimble player in other student retention strategies. The paper also covers data on how the program has helped with just-in-time solutions for new international students and peer academic advising. For example, since January 2014 to May 2016, PROPELS has served over 125 students. Out of the 125 students PROPELS has a graduation success rate of 83%. The paper concluded with the vision and plans for PROPELS for the next two years and five years including benchmarks in student service and expansion.

Who are Transitional Studies Students?

Students enrolled in Transitional Studies classes at Everett Community College are either non-native speakers of English and/or students who do not have a high school credential. While the intention of the instruction is that students will improve these skills and gain these credentials, institutional data indicates that only 9% of students transition to college-level classes. These Adult and Basic Education (ABE) programs were initially funded through the Workforce Innovation Act, or WIA, with the intention of students completing initial certificates and/or language proficiency to obtain a living wage job. In 2016, the legislation evolved to WIOA, or the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act. WIOA acknowledged that in order for students to obtain a living wage credential, it is not enough to improve literacy and numeracy skills; students must also obtain a high school credential and at least 45 college-level credits, the “Tipping Point” to a living wage job (Jenkins, 2008).

In addition to WIOA compliance, there is also a push for all students to not only move to college-level classes, but to also progress and complete degrees and certificates in a timely manner. Institutional research indicates that students who start at pre-college level in Math rarely complete their degree program; yet around 85% of all incoming students test into a developmental math level. An emerging model has shown progress with reversing this trend: Guided Pathways. In a Guided Pathways model, students move from a “Cafeteria Model,” in which they are overwhelmed by choices and pathways, to a Guided Pathways model, where they

are immediately involved a sequence that will lead to a degree or certificate within two years (Bailey, 2015.)

Both WIOA mandates and Guided Pathways restructuring will benefit students in Transitional Studies by creating clear pathways to college and career success. This is particularly important to first-generation and non-native speaking students who are often confused by college entrance, advising, and funding processes. However, in order for students to be successful in progressing and completing degree programs, a key component is wraparound services that will help them both navigate processes and engage in college life. The more students become involved in college life, the more likely they are to complete their degree and certificate programs (Tinto, 1993) Yet, most students in Transitional Studies do not participate in traditional Student Life programs because they have a myriad obligations outside of school, and/or because they do not perceive themselves as college students. For example, at Everett Community College, there is no representation of Transitional Studies in student government. This is where the BRIDGES Center and the PROPELS program have come into play as a key wraparound service for students in Transitional Studies.

Project PROPELS

In 2013-14, Washington's funding formula for higher education began shifting from enrollment numbers to a mix of head count *and* student retention and progress metrics. Through an innovative program called the Student Achievement Initiative (SAI), institutions whose students transitioned to college-level classes, reached 15- and 30-credit milestones and remained enrolled fall-to-fall earned extra dollars allocated by the State Board of Community and Technical Colleges.

Through a grant from Everett Community College's SAI funds, a pilot version of PROPELS (Peers Reaching Out to Promote Educational Learning & Success) was launched in March 2014 as a peer-to-peer mentoring program. Led by the program specialist, BRIDGES director, Dean of the Transitional Studies Division, senior faculty members and Grants specialist, a dozen EvCC student-mentors were recruited, trained and matched to Transitional Studies students who requested or required their support.

These student-mentors began building one-on-one bonds with their mentees, relationships that proved to be invaluable complements to College orientation and academic advising programs. Mentors earned personal growth and leadership skills, while the mentees benefitted from having a resource to help them engage with their studies, gain access to tutoring and other support programs as needed and become familiar with Student LIFE clubs, groups and activities.

With an ever-growing institutional focus on student success over the past two years, PROPELS has grown larger and more impactful in helping EvCC students to make connections with other students, with campus programs and with the college "lifestyle" — all of which are as essential as academics to fostering student success. The college decided to have PROPELS hosted in the center called "BRIDGES Center" where is provided wraparound services to students who is in need of navigating college life.

PROPELS Theories Framework: Servant Leadership and Kolb's Experience Learning

As educators and Student Services practitioners, we dedicate our lives to serving students. We want them to become successful in their educational journeys; our job is to serve. The PROPELS program has incorporated the Servant Leadership Theory as one of the frameworks for its program objectives and outcomes. "The servant leadership is the servant first"

(Greenleaf, 2002); Greenleaf states that great leaders are seen as servants first and his belief is still valued in today practice.

What does it mean to embrace Servant Leadership? Can someone be a servant and a leader at the same time? The origins of Servant Leadership theory came from the message of Herman Hess's *Journey to the East*. The story described how the group struggled when they lost the central figure, Leo, who is the servant to the group. They never thought that a humble servant would actually be the true head of the orders (Greenleaf, 1977).

The opportunity to apply this theory came about in staging the 2015 Students of Color Conference (SOCC) at Everett Community College (EvCC), when the PROPELS program specialist, participated in a Servant Leadership workshop at Highline College (HC) in Des Moines, WA. The Center of Leadership Service (CLS) and Multicultural Affairs (MCA) at HC have incorporated the theory of Servant Leadership into many of their programs within Student Services.

The belief that serving others first, and understanding a program specialist's role as a servant, has impacted PROPELS as one of its guiding principles, creating a paradigm shift around leadership development and the perspectives students have toward the role of a leader. In applying Servant Leadership theory to PROPELS's objectives, the focus has been on first understanding what student-mentees need in terms of support—before guiding them toward college resources or lifestyles. That is crucial.

On the first day of student-mentor orientation, the PROPELS program specialist introduces the framework of Servant Leadership. The initial curriculum components include:

- An explanation of the concept of Servant Leadership
- How to apply Servant Leadership into everyday work
- The PROPELS program expectations for student-mentors

On the second day of training, Kolb's Theory of Experiential Learning plays a key role. According to the theory David Kolb developed in the mid-1980s, the impetus for developing new concepts is provided by new experiences. His theory states that learning involves the acquisition of abstract concepts that can be applied to a variety of situations. "Learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (Kolb, 1984). Thus, the second day of PROPELS training includes role playing to develop familiarity with:

- The importance of diversity and inclusion
- The stages of mentoring
- Professionalism and communication Skills
- Understanding college life and campus resources
- How to navigate as a mentor and relate appropriately to one's mentee

The significance of Kolb's Theory of Experiential Learning in PROPELS

Students participating in PROPELS tend to be disproportionately low-income, first-generation students, often non-native English learners or out-of-school youth. As more international students increasingly participate in PROPELS, it is important to recognize that although their socio-economic status is different from many American students, they struggle with many of the same challenges and must overcome some of the same barriers to successfully completing their degrees and finding a suitable job. Mindful of these issues, the PROPELS program specialist and staff have incorporated Experiential Learning theory into the program's framework.

According to Kolb, Experiential Learning Theory can help educators understand the challenges and appropriate support needed for students from different environments and who come from different learning and development styles. Working with the diverse population participating in PROPELS, Kolb's theory has been instrumental in supporting the implementation of best practices to support student-mentees' learning and development.

Kolb categorized learning styles as a four-stage cycle comprised of these components:

- Concrete Experience (CE) as a feeling dimension
- Reflective Observation (RO) as a watching dimension
- Abstract Conceptualization (AC) as a thinking dimension
- Active Experimentation (AE) as a doing dimension

Each stage is a foundation of its own dimension. Concrete experience (CE) forms the basis of observation and reflection (RO), and these two stages are critical in creating idea with full and unbiased involvement in learning experiences. Furthermore, CE and RO can be a support in the area of AC in which helps in developing ideas, including generalization of idea or theories. The last stage is to put idea into action (AE), this stage helps incorporate each dimension to the final deliver of the idea as action (Kolb, 1984, p. 138). Kolb (1984) also believes in order to be effective, learners need skills to incorporate these four stages of the cycle of learning into their learning development.

Later on in his research, Kolb developed a further refinement of his Learning Style Model (Kolb, 2000, p. 140). He wanted to ensure that learners understand that learning styles can change over time. This later model renamed the components as Converging, Diverging, Assimilating, and Accommodating. Each style addresses different skill set in learning, as follows:

- *Assimilator* (RO –watching dimension). This person will emphasize ideas rather than focus on people and will possess strengths in inductive reasoning, creation of theoretical models, and integrating observations.
- *Converger* (AE –doing dimension). This person will excel in technical tasks, versus social/interpersonal settings, and will exhibit strength in problem solving, decision-making, and practical applications. (Combining both learning abilities as Assimilator and Converger is known as AC — Abstract Conceptualization).
- *Accommodator* (CE- Feeling dimension) will excel in: Action oriented, at ease with people, trial and error problem solving and strengths in carrying out plans, openness to new experiences, and adapting to change
- *Diverger* (CE- Feeling dimension). This person will excel relating to people and feelings, while exhibiting strengths in imaginative ability, awareness of meaning and values, and ability to analyze alternatives.

All four learning styles have advantages and disadvantages, depending on a person's life experiences and on the learning environment. The PROPELS program applies Kolb's Theory of Experiential Learning to its training in a number of role-playing activities. Each training workshop curriculum is based on student learning styles across all four dimensions, giving student-mentors the opportunity to incorporate real-life experiences that fit the model of how they learn best. They observe scenarios, they act on real-life scenarios (the sample of social justice scenario will be shared in the next session), they ask challenge questions, they share how they feel about a certain scenario, and they provide feedback and suggestions, and most importantly, they take action based on what they have learned. PROPELS has incorporated role

play for specific scenarios for the past three years, with the result that student-mentors become engaged, they take responsibility for helping leverage social change, and they embrace the idea of creating a community of support as integral to their educational journey at EvCC and beyond.

Kolb's Theory of Experiential Learning in action: What We Do

PROPELS student mentors serve as a positive academic and social role model for students. They are an additional support service for both students and academic advisors. Student mentors have 4 major responsibilities:

1. Develop and establish a personal relationship with their mentees
2. Promote personal growth, leadership, communication, and life skills
3. Assist students with additional support services for academic success
4. Increase student social and cultural competency

All students are welcome to become a mentor, and PROPELS provides quarterly training for both mentors and mentees. Mentors are assigned up to 10 students per group. The mentors meet with each student for a minimum of an hour a week based on need. During these meetings the mentors check-in with their mentees. They discuss any accomplishments or challenges that the mentee may be facing for example, doing exceptional on an exam or difficulties completing an assignment. Any challenges the mentee may be facing, the mentor is there to give their support by looking at the problem, and coming up with a solution together. If necessary, the mentor will suggest a student resource to the mentee based on the nature of the issue.

The PROPELS program understands that there are several factors that play a role in the process of student development. We know that students all come to college with their own experiences, which shape who they are. How these students succeed and grow depends heavily upon their attitudes coming into college, past and present accomplishments, their values, beliefs, and engagement. The PROPELS program encourages students involvement in campus activities in order to better their knowledge, influencing their academic development, as well as social awareness, and cultural proficiency.

PROPELS incorporates scenario based role-playing with focus on three areas, personal growth, social justice, and academic development. These role-playing exercise align with EvCC's strategic plan, in which infuses innovative learning and pedagogy, with emphasis on critical thinking, and collaborative learning. The scenarios are created from real-life situations that happen on and off campus.

Our students come from many different backgrounds, cultures, and traditions; we stress the importance of understanding that individual's values and beliefs may not all be in unison. Many students will not have the same reaction to given situations because of these various differences. As noted in the Kolb Learning Style Model, student-mentors may be faced with situations that challenge these values and beliefs; how the student-mentor responds in these situations is critical in creating an inclusive environment, and the academic success of our students.

The following social justice role-play was used during PROPELS student-mentor leadership training. Prior to the role-playing exercise, the PROPELS specialist met with the

program director to go over each scenario. The specialist also employed help from other support services, i.e. the Diversity and Equity center. The goal of this role-playing exercise was intended to train the student-mentors so that they may apply solution based problem-solving, in order to improve experiential learning, and cultural competency.

Scenario: Your mentee has shared with you that they are being harassed by another group of students because of their religious beliefs. Your mentee tells you that this group has made it difficult for them to focus on their studies and that they have missed class because they are afraid. What would you do?

During each exercise, the program specialist asks the student-mentors to volunteer, each taking on a different role; one as the student-mentor and the other as the mentee. The student-mentors were given directions by the program specialist and they were instructed to improvise their given role. In this exercise, body language and vocal tone were also observed. The purpose of this is to see how each student would respond in relation to Kolb's four learning style. During the exercise, other student-mentors were asked to take notes, and apply critical thinking as if they were responding to this situation. At the end of the improvisation the program specialist asked the students to reflect on their experience. The student-mentors and program specialist discussed things that they felt were beneficial and opportunities to improve on, and give their feedback and suggestions to the volunteers. They were then asked to use these suggestions in order to improve the situation, and make suggestions of student services that they could offer to the mentee.

Conclusion

The PROPELS mentoring program has shown early success in retention and completion rates for students, especially students in one or more at-risk categories (first-generation, low-income, etc.) As of 2015, 125 students signed up for the program, 92 students participated, and the programs has maintained retention and completion rates among mentors 98% and 86% among mentees. In the future, the program plans to continue to assess activities. In addition, PROPELS will be responsive to emergent situations on campus. For example, in Spring of 2016 a group of international students from Papua arrived on campus. While they had received intensive English training, they were still in need of intensive cultural training for the campus and community, including everything from using a computer to eating with a knife and fork. PROPELS was able to set up specific mentors to help these students. The program will also work to collaborate with other mentoring programs on campus as a part of EvCC's cultural of mentoring.

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