

EDPY574

Summer Sem 2025

2.1. Proposal & Outline

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Proposal for Connection Lab or ConnectED or FY Collective Lab

A significant developmental milestone for young adults is the transition from secondary to higher education. Students entering or currently enrolled in their first year at colleges and universities in the United States frequently report experiencing symptoms of depression and anxiety (Shine, 2023). Mental health challenges are among the leading causes of withdrawal or discontinuation of studies among first-year undergraduate students (Jackson, 2024).

While overall retention and persistence rates for undergraduate students at both public and private institutions in the United States have returned to pre-COVID-19 levels: 77.6% in 2023 compared to 76.7% in 2021 (“Persistence & Retention,” 2025)—the dropout rate for Generation Z undergraduates remains concerning. As of 2023, the overall dropout rate among Gen Z students was 32.9%, with first-year students accounting for 23.3% of that figure (Bareham, 2023).

To improve retention rates among incoming and current Gen Z students, colleges and universities must go beyond traditional mental health and wellness services. A 2023 study found that: (1) social support significantly and positively predicts academic engagement; (2) social support influences academic engagement through the mediating effect of life satisfaction; (3) social support affects academic engagement through the mediating effect of academic motivation; and (4) life satisfaction and academic motivation jointly mediate the relationship between social support and academic engagement (Chen et al., 2023).

Therefore, institutions of higher education can more effectively support Gen Z students by implementing structured and inclusive systems of support that promote multidimensional interaction among peers, upper-level students, and faculty. These systems can help students better anticipate and manage the academic, social, and emotional transitions they face during their first year.

Research Questions:

1. How do peer social support groups impact first year students' adjustment to personal and social changes during their first year at college/university?
2. Which components of a social support group are the most important for student perception of wellbeing and persistence?

Methodology:

To implement multidimensional and dynamic social support groups, incoming first-year and transfer students would be automatically enrolled in a two-semester course. The structure and

intent of this course would be similar to the "First Year Experience" seminar at the University of Tennessee, described as: *"Vol 105 is a one-credit course that focuses on your strengths and well-being while tackling topics such as learning strategies, career competencies, financial literacy, and life at UT"* (Division of Student Success, 2024). However, the proposed course would function more as a learning laboratory than as a traditional topical seminar. Its primary objective would be to provide an exploratory learning experience with a focused emphasis on relational and social dynamics, particularly as they pertain to the transitions necessary for student success in higher education.

Participants would be organized into three tiers for multidimensional support:

- **Group One (Primary Peer Support Group):** Each incoming student would be placed into a group of 5–7 peers. This group would form the core of the support structure, fostering consistent peer interaction and relational development.
- **Group Two (Peer Mentorship Group):** Group One would be supported by a supervisory group consisting of two upperclassmen or graduate students. Preference would be given to graduate students pursuing degrees in counseling, psychology, or mental health and student workers employed as resident assistants or workers in enrollment, recruitment, admissions, or support.
- **Group Three (Faculty and Staff Oversight Group):** This group would consist of two facilitators—one male and one female, ideally one member would be a current faculty member with a background in counseling, psychology, or mental health. The other member, ideally, would be a student services professional or staff member from enrollment, student support, or a retention specialist.

Group One would meet weekly on a scheduled, rotating basis with either Group Two or Group Three. Additional meetings may be arranged as needed, based on feedback and assessment from Groups Two and Three. The goal is for each Group One to meet with Groups Two and Three a total of four times per month.

Meeting Structure and Content:

A weekly one-hour meeting will be scheduled on a weekday mutually agreed upon by all three groups. At the beginning of each week (Monday), an electronic survey will be distributed to members of Group One to identify topics of interest that would be most beneficial for discussion. The initial meeting will include all members from Groups One, Two, and Three. Suggested topics for this inaugural session include understanding academic expectations, navigating campus resources, managing personal finances, and prioritizing mental and physical health. Prior to this first meeting, members of Groups Two and Three should meet or communicate to finalize the most relevant topics for discussion.

Leaders from Groups Two and Three are encouraged to foster open communication by inviting members of Group One to share concerns or suggest topics they would like to explore in future meetings.

Special topic discussions and guest members from the institution's academic departments would be invited and scheduled to lead a learning lab on a selected topic related to their academic concentration in relation to the overall objectives of the project.

Rationale:

The primary objective of this initiative is to support first-year students in their academic transition and to promote student retention and persistence. Research indicates that students who withdraw from their studies are significantly less likely to re-enroll at any institution of higher education (Hanson, 2025). The long-term economic and institutional costs associated with student attrition far exceed the projected costs of implementing the proposed support system.

Explanation of Cost:

The primary cost of this initiative will be the time-commitment required from all participants. To incentivize upper-level undergraduate and graduate student involvement, course credit could be offered through departmental internships or supervised facilitation programs. Alternatively, participation could be structured as a student worker position, either newly created or integrated into existing roles such as resident assistants, enrollment coordinators, or student advisors.

For faculty participants, involvement could be recognized as institutional service in lieu of additional compensation.

The time commitment for first-year students can be justified by integrating the course into the core curriculum required for graduation. The course could be structured as a three-credit offering, distributed across one academic year (1.5 credits per semester). Assessment could follow a Pass/Fail or Complete/Incomplete grading model to emphasize engagement and participation over traditional performance metrics.

Evaluation:

To determine the success of this project, Group One will complete an electronic survey in which they will evaluate and comment on the interaction, support, and usefulness of the class as well as the effectiveness of the members of Group Two and Group Three. Group One will also be offered the opportunity for individual face-to-face exit interviews as well as a focus group to be facilitated with an objective evaluator that was not directly related to their group or Group 2 or Group 3.

References

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