

Program Title: Husky Connect Program
Institution: Michigan Technological University
Innovation Category: Underserved Populations
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**Michigan
Technological
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Website: <https://www.mtu.edu/diversity-center/involved/husky-connect>

Project Description: Husky Connect: Peer to Peer Mentoring is a program coordinated through the auspices of the Center for Diversity and Inclusion (CDI). The mission of Husky Connect is to aid first-year, underrepresented minority (URM) students (i.e. domestic ethnic minorities, LGBTQIA+ students, and women) in their transition to the Michigan Technological University community by providing direct support and resources to increase their success, sense of belonging, and engagement with the university. The program addresses topics pertinent to the first-year experience and that correspond with the various times of the freshman year. Topics may include homesickness, student organizations and campus involvement, studying, interactions with faculty and administration, navigating campus as an underrepresented student, and understanding campus services. The program is an opportunity to connect new students to someone who understands or can empathize with them about the demands of college life. As the campus has a predominately white and male population, it is important to remind our URM students that they belong here.

Project Objectives:

- 1) Increase URM students' personal growth and self-reliance
- 2) Provide accurate information and access to campus services and resources both before students start at Michigan Tech and throughout their first year
- 3) Cultivate student engagement with campus events, activities, and programming
- 4) Validate URM students' identities to create a stronger sense of belonging
- 5) Improve retention rates for traditionally underserved students at Michigan Tech
- 6) Assist students in establishing their own pathway to achieve educational and social goals

Target Population: First-year, underrepresented minority (URM) students (i.e. domestic ethnic minorities, LGBTQIA+ students, and women) at Michigan Technological University.

Quantifiable/Qualifiable Outcomes:

- *Since 2016, Husky Connect has had three cohorts with a total of 23 mentors and 34 mentees.*
- *Participants' demographics: Women n=35, Men n=16, Transgender woman n=2, Transgender man n=2, Gender non-conforming n=3, LGBTQIA+ n=15, Latinx n=9, Students of color n=6, Asian n=3, South Asian (Indian) n=1, Black/African American n=5, Mixed race n=1.*

Challenges/Problems Encountered: The institutional challenge for this program is funding. The mentors are hired from April until December, instead of for the academic year; therefore, we do not have formal programs/meetings for students in the spring. Ideally, we encourage the mentors and mentees to continue to meet, but there are no monetary incentives. In the spring semester, we contact mentors and mentees via email and let them know of programs happening on campus; however, during this time we do not get as much face-to-face time as

we do in the fall semester. With additional funding we could enable the students to continue their mentorship in the spring. Students would be encouraged to maintain relationships and would have an easier transition when hiring the mentors for the next academic year. Funding also includes marketing, recruitment, activities off campus, and meals to support different events.

Evaluation Approach: Surveys have been implemented as an evaluation tool to ensure objectives are being met. Mentors and mentees are given a pre-survey at the start of the fall semester and a post survey at the end of the fall semester. The surveys include statements on a Likert scale ranging from Strongly Agree to Disagree. Mentors' surveys focused on skills needed to be an effective mentor. Examples of the statements on the mentor survey were:

- (1) Husky Connect is providing me tools to learn how to identify and accommodate different communication styles
- (2) Husky Connect is providing me tools to learn how to use different strategies to improve communication

41.7% of the mentor participants agreed the program is providing them with tools on how to identify different strategies to improve communication.

The mentees' survey focused on the Husky Connect program and how the program assists in achieving their educational and social goals. The mentee survey included statements such as:

- (1) The Husky Connect program was instrumental in helping me achieve my social goals
- (2) I learned about different academic resources through the Husky Connect program
- (3) The Husky Connect program was instrumental in helping me achieve my academic goals

27.3% of the mentees strongly agreed and 45.5% of the mentees agreed that the program was instrumental in helping achieve social goals. Of the mentee participants, 9.1% strongly agreed the program assisted learning about different academic resources. 18.2% mentees strongly agreed and 18.2% agreed that the program was instrumental in helping achieve their academic goals.

Qualitative data was collected about the program as well. Both past mentors and mentees were invited to attend a focus group. There were 4 participants in the mentor focus group and 3 participants in the mentee focus group. When asked how the Husky Connect Program has helped individual, personal and professional development, a past mentor participant responded, "It [Husky Connect Program] also helps you to look at things differently, and develop the ability to look at things from multiple perspectives and become a good listener."

When past mentees were asked of their experience with the program, one participant noted, "I feel like socially it helps because obviously [its] not a very diverse campus and so [my mentor] helped me feel like I had somebody to go to that had like the same culture, kind of, to connect with."

The program coordinator plans to continue collecting quantitative and qualitative evaluations to improve the program and to ensure the objectives are being met.

Value Proposition, Financing Strategy and Return-On-Investment Indicators:

According to data from Fall 2016, the retention rate for our incoming URM first-time freshmen was 63.2% (<https://www.mtu.edu/diversity/facts/retention/>). As an institution, we have data showing that if a student can retain their enrollment in the first and second academic years, the

student will most likely graduate from the university. We are using the Husky Connect program for retention and to increase the sense of belonging for our students. Through this program they have access to support services with all of departments on campus, which leads to improved degree completion and self-satisfaction. Currently the CDI is solely providing funding for the program, but there is a need to increase funding. At this time, grants are being sought for financing Husky Connect in the next academic year. Since Husky Connect is a new program, we are working on collecting retention data.

Potential for Replication: Husky Connect is a simple program that can be replicated, but adjustments should be made to better fit the culture of the institution. When considering replication, universities should use best practices in reaching their targeted populations. Institutions may want to evaluate their student population to determine which populations they would like to target to increase retention on their campus. Administration must take into consideration the societal challenges of the students and build a curriculum with clear objectives to ensure the program will meet the needs of their target population.

Another item to consider when evaluating whether to implement a peer-to-peer mentoring program such as Husky Connect is the hiring of mentors. Institutions may not be able to provide monetary compensation for the mentors' time, so institutions must be creative in providing incentives for becoming a mentor. At this time, this program is housed in the Center for Diversity and Inclusion. However, the program can be housed in any department on campus, both in student and academic affairs.

Vendor Involvement: No vendors are involved.

Requisite Program Manager Competencies: The program coordinator must understand student development theory such as sense of belonging and thriving theory. The coordinator must demonstrate an understanding of how to navigate societal challenges for URM students. The coordinator must be able to work collaboratively with other departments on campus. For example, administrative competencies include working with Admissions to get a list of incoming first-year URM students to be able to invite them to join Husky Connect. The coordinator then contacts each student on the list with information about the program. The coordinator answers all the questions and is responsible for ensuring outreach is relationship-focused. It is also the responsibility of the coordinator to recruit, advise, and build relationships with key stakeholder on the campus and in the community.

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