

# Even Amid Covid-19, Enrollment Soared at This University. Here's Why.

[chronicle.com/article/even-amid-covid-19-enrollment-soared-at-this-university-heres-why](https://www.chronicle.com/article/even-amid-covid-19-enrollment-soared-at-this-university-heres-why)

Asher Swan for The Chronicle

September 28, 2020



Five years ago, two administrators at Southern Utah University worked evenings calling hundreds of students who had dropped out to ask them why. The causes, they learned, weren't exactly surprising: financial challenges. Family problems. Poor fit. The usual reasons students leave without a degree. But after students repeatedly said they didn't know where to go or who to talk to about their reasons for leaving, the administrators had a revelation.

“This was Generation Z arriving on campus,” said Jared Tippetts, vice president for student affairs. “They’re going to engage and interact with us differently. They’re not going to come and say, ‘I’m struggling. Can you help me?’ We learned through that process that we better start creating authentic relationships with students.”

He and his colleagues spent the next five years aiming for that, investing heavily in outreach to students and their parents, thinking about how to communicate with a new generation of undergraduates, and starting a program that assigns each new freshman or transfer student to a peer mentor with whom they develop a relationship even before they set foot on campus.

It's paid off, and the rewards have continued during the pandemic. According to preliminary numbers, the university's overall enrollment is up about 15 percent from last year. This bucks the trend for colleges and universities over all. As of September 10, according to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, higher education avoided the apocalyptic free fall that some had feared but still saw a 2.5-percent drop in undergraduate enrollment from last year. Southern Utah's freshman-retention rate, which had climbed last year to 74 percent from 64 percent in 2014, is also expected to rise a percent or two this year, Tippets says.

The university has a hybrid model this semester. Most students are taking in-person classes, but about 20 percent are entirely online. The university offered a tuition discount for students taking classes online.

A bit of luck certainly factors into the university's success. Amid continuing financial uncertainty, a public regional college like Southern Utah offers an affordable alternative to pricier, farther flung institutions. About 73 percent of its students come from Utah, while the college also recruits from populous nearby areas including Las Vegas, Phoenix, and Southern California. And as a deadly virus rampages through the United States, a college in a relatively rural area — Cedar City, where Southern Utah is located, has about 35,000 residents — can assuage the worries of parents and students who want a relatively safe in-person experience. Even so, Southern Utah makes clear that at a time of profound disconnection, physical and psychological, there's no substitute for cultivating relationships with your students.

## Investing in Peer Mentoring

---

Yaneth Vasquez was scared to be away from home when she first arrived at Southern Utah from Las Vegas and worried about making friends. But her peer mentor — they're called ACES, or assistant coaches for excellence and success — helped her meet people and connect with the campus. He kept checking in weekly to make sure she was settling into college life. "My ACE was probably my first friend on campus," Vasquez says. "He made me feel like I belonged here." Two years later, Vasquez, now a junior biology major, is a peer mentor herself.

The mentoring program — the core of Southern Utah's plan to improve retention rates — has been an indispensable tool during the pandemic, Tippets says. The program was the product of those hundreds of calls made by Tippets and Eric Kirby, assistant vice president for student affairs. Peer mentors must have expertise about the university's support services. They receive 40 hours of training, including on student-privacy laws and Title IX.

All of the university's incoming students are divided among the 28 paid peer mentors, roughly 120 or so students each. It's a big case load, and Tippets wants to get it down to about 75 students per mentor. But for most students, a quick text or email each week checking how they're doing does the trick. Mentors are trained to pay extra attention to at-risk students: those from low-income backgrounds, with poor high-school GPAs, or showing other signs of struggling.

The mentoring program has become a one-stop shop for connecting students with campus support. Tippetts used to have to educate new faculty and staff members about university support services so they could help students with questions. Now, he just tells them to walk students with inquiries over to the Nest, the space in the student center where peer mentors work. From there, the mentors answer the student's question or walk them to the office on campus that can.

"The magic happens in the walk," Tippetts says. "That's where the relationships are formed."

ADVERTISEMENT

## Outreach to Parents

---

Peer mentors, along with about 60 student ambassadors, are also involved with outreach efforts to help communicate university messages to current and prospective students. When President Scott L. Wyatt announced he would hold tuition flat and reduce fees by 40 percent because of the pandemic, the university sent an email to students about the news. But the student ambassadors and mentors also hopped on the phone to underscore the message and talk through any questions people might have.

"There's enormous power when information comes from their peers," says Stuart Jones, vice president for advancement and enrollment management. "We as administrators are seen as paid hired guns."

That outreach extends to parents as well. (Nearly 98 percent of the university's undergraduate students are younger than 25.) The university contacted parents of admitted students, many of them in denser recruitment areas like Las Vegas and Southern California, who had worries about the virus to reassure them that Cedar City was relatively safe. An employee in the parent office spends most of her day on the phone fielding questions, Tippetts says.

Even before the pandemic, Southern Utah recognized parents played an important part in their students' success. The university keeps parents one step ahead: For example, the third week of the semester is when homesickness often kicks in, so the university emails students about how to cope. But the week before that, the university has emailed parents to let them know they might hear about homesickness, and suggested ways to help.

"For a long time in higher education, people pushed parents away and said, 'Leave us alone, we'll take care of your student,'" Tippetts says. "We have taken the approach that parents are the biggest champions of their student, and we should partner with them in their success."