



CASE STUDY

Leveraging peer mentorship and
a new orientation approach to
impact student retention and
sense of belonging

created in partnership with

the college

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

Abstract

The office of College Programming and Orientation (CPO) at The University of Chicago was tasked with designing and launching a mentorship program that would connect admitted first year and transfer students to the College. In 2018, UChicago partnered with Wisr to create the UChicago Mentorship Program (UCMP), which provides incoming new students with upper-class peer mentors via a custom Wisr site. With this programming launch, the CPO's biggest goals were to assist students with their transition to the College and to help build a sense of belonging with the UChicago campus community.

The program launched in May 2019 and within thirty days approximately 2/3 (982 students) of the incoming class opted into the program, were matched with a peer mentor pod, and 472 direct 1:1 chat messages were sent between students and their peers.

Within six months of continued engagement, the program ended with 1,258 first year and transfer student participants, 1,521 direct chat messages sent between students and their peers, and 8,695 unique content email clicks from students delivered content automatically through the platform. In an initial analysis, **UChicago College Admissions reported a 29% reduction in summer melt between the incoming class of 2018 and 2019.** We are continuing to work with UChicago to measure the impact UCMP has on first year retention and sense of belonging.

Key Takeaways

- 1) Create a trained peer mentor point of contact as soon as possible once a new student has accepted.
- 2) Leverage monthly summer orientation modules that track the engagement of a student with both the module and their peer mentors.
- 3) Deliver just-in-time content as opposed to an overwhelming volume of orientation materials at the front end of the process.

Project Approach

The College Programming and Orientation team outlined three primary goals that UCMP needed to meet:

- Provide new students with a relatable connection to campus and the UChicago community.
- Deliver relevant orientation information and resources through one accessible and easy-to-use tool.
- Provide support and direction to new students related to their transition, primarily through relationships with upper-class students.

PART ONE | Peer Mentors

Selection

In this project, 59 upper-class students were selected and trained as peer mentors. In exchange for volunteering, they received valuable work experience and incentives such as prizes, UChicago swag, and free food.

Training

The platform included video-based training content delivered in a group-format to the peer mentors. Peer mentors attended two training sessions in late April to prepare for the program. Peer mentors were provided templates for a series of monthly learning modules that included getting to know Chicago, campus safety, preparing for move-in, campus life, and more. This content was pre-loaded into Wisr, via professional staff members. Peer mentors could then easily deliver to these modules to their pods.

Peer Mentor Roles and Responsibilities

As stated in the UCMP Peer Mentor responsibilities guide, the role of a peer mentor is to be a **companion, coach, connector, and champion**. Students may confide and share information with a peer mentor more readily than they would with a University staff member. As such, CPO defined what a peer mentor is, and is not. For example, a peer mentor is a prompt and reliable role model, a peer mentor is not a therapist.

Assigning Mentor Pods

Each mentor was given a private digital community that included a directory of their students, event calendar, digital resource area, and discussion board. Peer mentors were assigned “Community Leader” privileges to oversee the community and monitor the engagement of their assigned students. Approximately 30-35 first year and transfer students were assigned to each peer mentor pod.

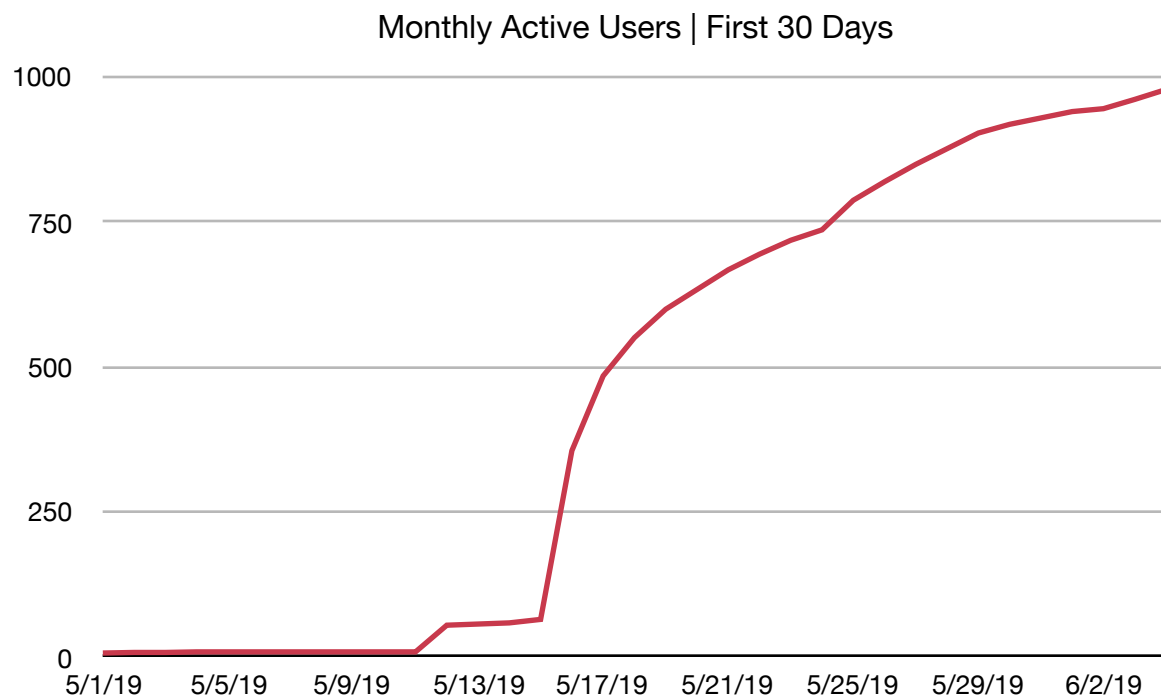
PART TWO | The Big Welcome

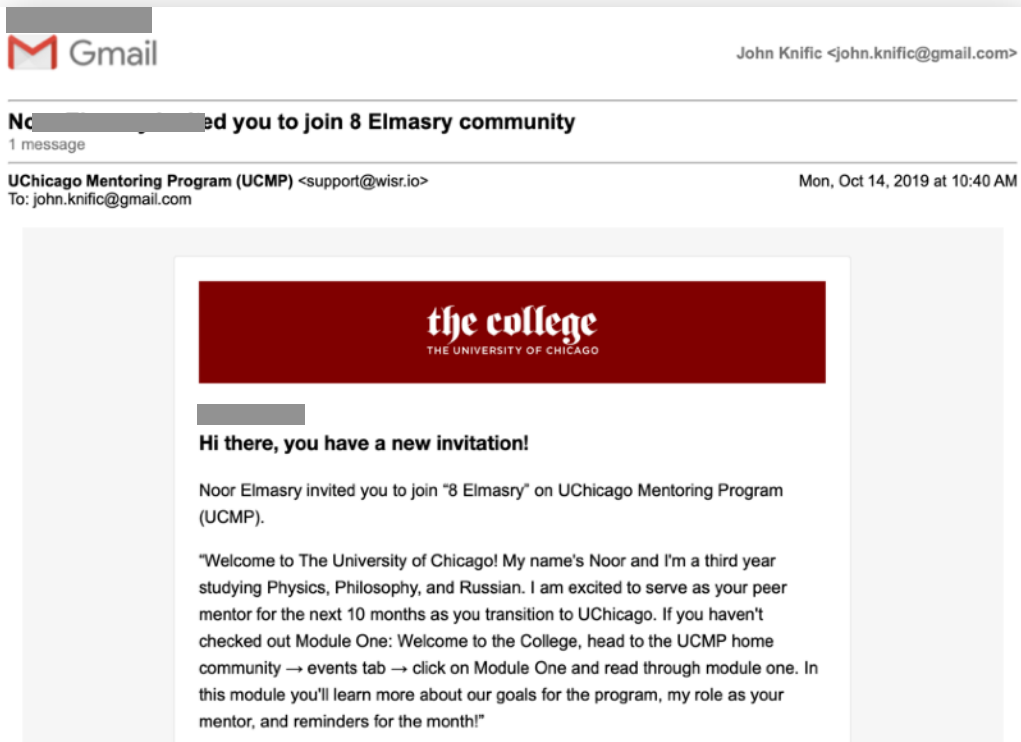


On May 1 (“Decision Day”), first year students confirmed their acceptance to UChicago (transfer students have until June 1)

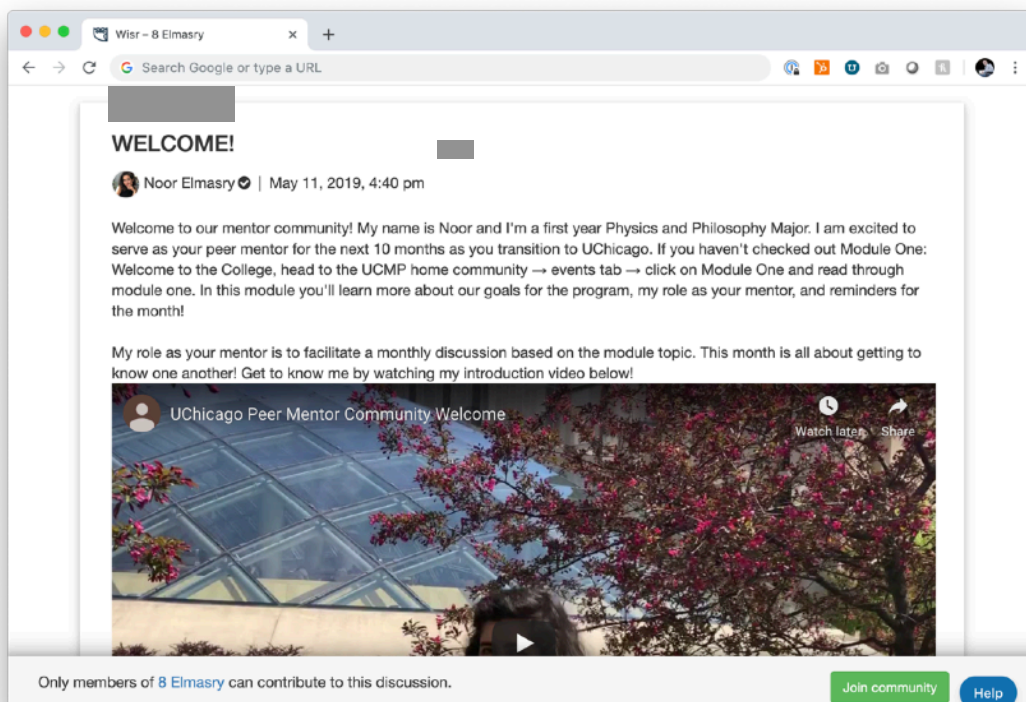


On May 15th, incoming first years received a personalized invitation from their peer mentor with a welcome video and one click-access to their peer mentor pod.





Personalized welcome email from peer mentor to new student



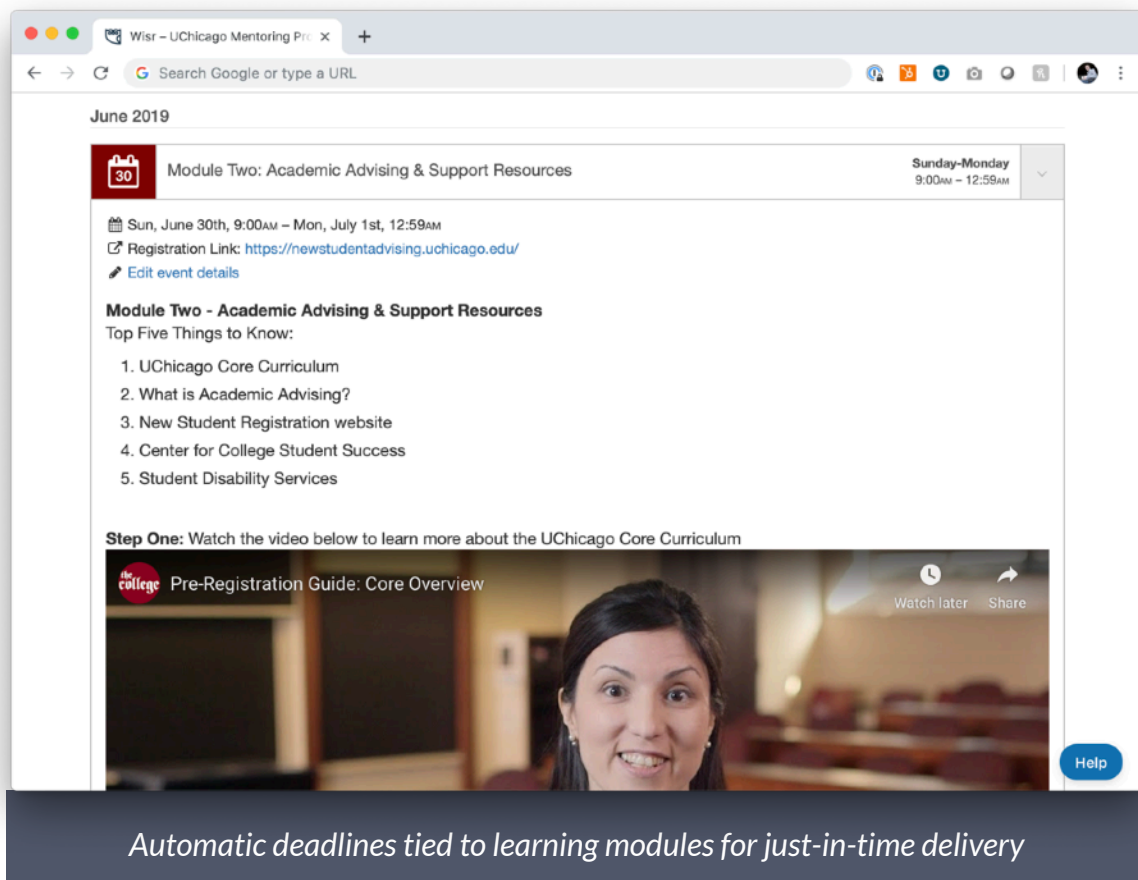
Welcome video from peer mentor on the community landing page

PART THREE | Learning modules

UCMP Learning Modules were monthly topics and content created to help students with their transition to the University. Modules had three components:

- 1) Content: The top five things to know about the specific topic, presented in a variety of methods such as videos, slides, handouts, and websites.
- 2) Discussion: A discussion thread and/or engagement activity related to the topic, facilitated by the peer mentor in their small group communities.
- 3) Monthly To-Do Lists / Events: Reminded students about key upcoming deadlines and assigned activities

By using Wisr, the CPO team had a digital home for this content and took advantage of features such as communities, discussion threads, file uploads, and event postings. The content was automatically rolled into an e-mail newsletter and available in-app.



PART FOUR | Real-Time Community Building

Incoming students were asking for opportunities to connect with other students prior to their arrival on campus. Through UCMP's mobile device-friendly Wizr site, students were able to use the search feature to find peers with similar interests.

As part of on-boarding, peer mentors built a profile that includes academic and professional experience. They also indicate specific ways they would be helpful, ranging from attending a campus event as a peer to helping students find on-campus employment.

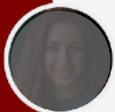
Wizr's real-time matching algorithm made suggested connections to students based on shared areas of interest and needs indicated in the app. Further, students could filter by any of these parameters to seek help in a real-time chat interface.

Peer Mentor ✕

Share advice on my major exploration process ✕

Mathematics ✕

2 members



Mathematics and Psychology Major at The University of Chicago


Peer Mentor · 2021 B.S. in Mathematics

2021 B.A. in Psychology from The University of Chicago

Chicago, IL

Send a message

Schedule a call



Math and Computer Science Nerd

Peer Mentor · 2020 B.S. in Computational and Applied M...

2020 M.S. in Computer Science from The University of C...

Chicago, IL

Send a message

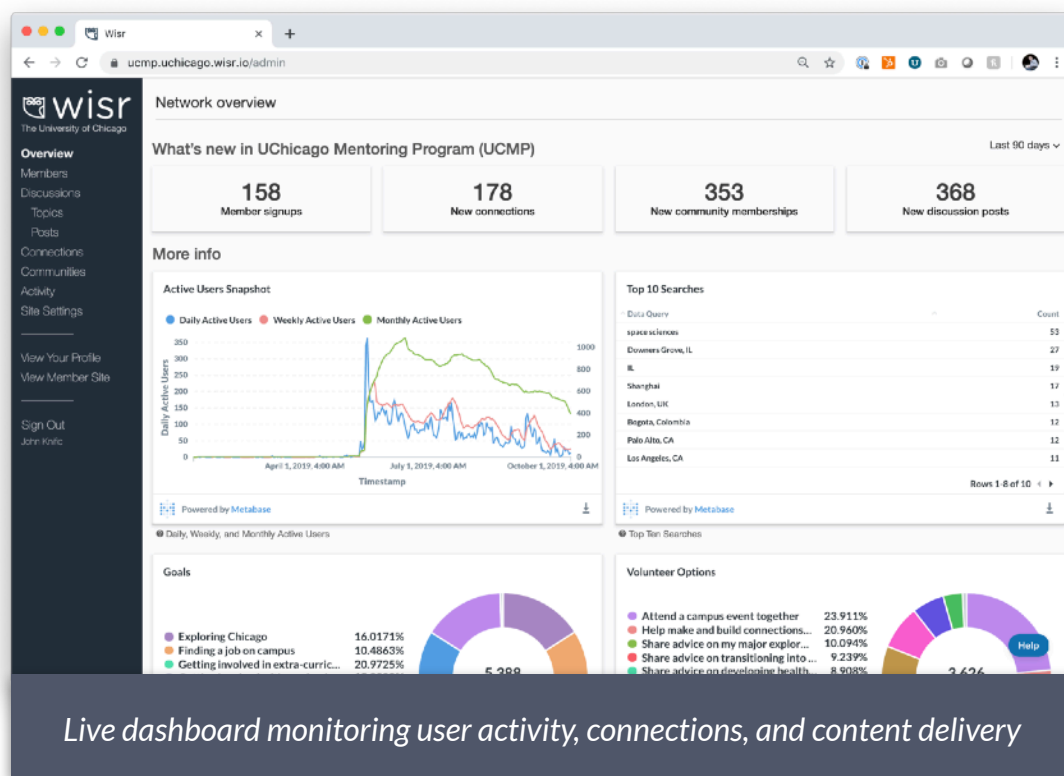
Schedule a call

Suggested peer connections based on point-in-time needs

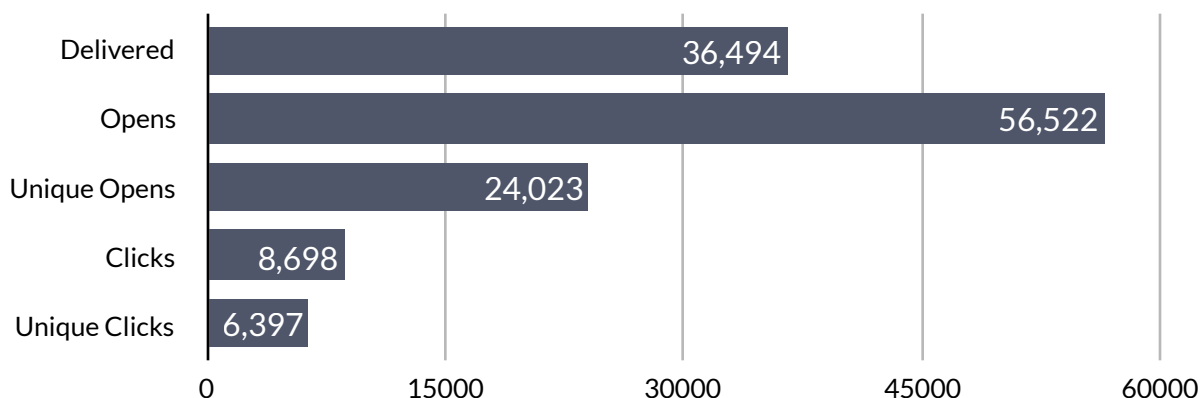
PART FIVE: Engagement Data

Behind the scenes, the CPO team monitors peer mentor and student participant engagement. The team prioritized outreach to unengaged students by monitoring for first years who had not yet connected with their peer mentor.

While UCMP included a very large number of peer mentors and students, it required only one full-time staff member to oversee the day to day of the program.



Automated Email Touch-points



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to express our deepest gratitude to The University of Chicago for their partnership. A special thanks goes to Chloe Binder, Director of Orientation and Student Development and Whitney Hedge, Assistant Director for Orientation and Student Development. Their willingness to test new approaches to programming and technology demonstrates the innovative culture of UChicago. The Wizr team intends to continue testing, learning, and improving together.