

MARCH 2022

Making Peer Connections with Nearpeer at California University of Pennsylvania & Loyola University, New Orleans

College Innovation Network
Evaluation and Impact Report

Please direct media
queries to:

cin@wgulabs.org

Citation:

College Innovation Network
(2022, March). Making Peer
Connections with Nearpeer
at California University of
Pennsylvania and Loyola
University, New Orleans. *CIN
Evaluation and Impact Report*.



College
Innovation
Network

Executive Summary

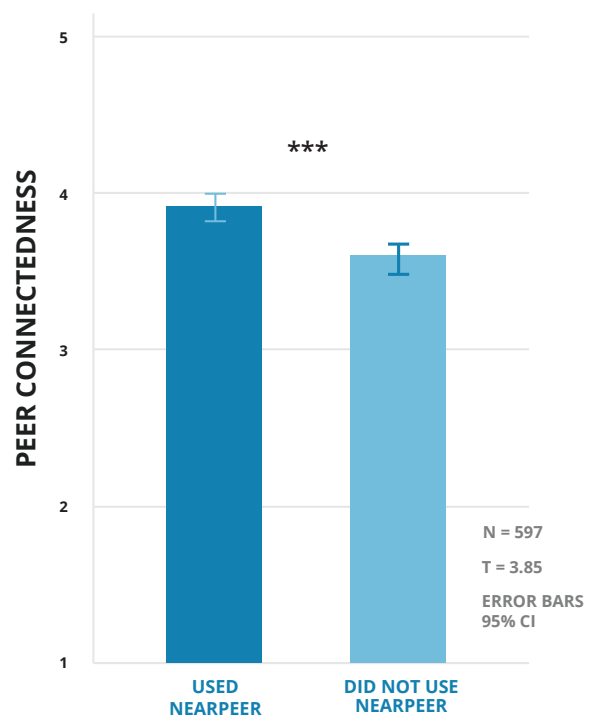
Higher education enrollment has been declining¹ in recent years among broader demographic shifts and global events. As students are making decisions about if and where to enroll for college, admissions and student life leaders are focusing on building peer connections among students to foster a greater sense of connectedness with their institutions to increase enrollment and persistence.

The focus on fostering peer connections for students is necessary because peer connections among students have clear benefits. Evidence suggests that peer connections contribute to broader academic success in courses, are related to greater persistence², and are an important aspect of the overall college student experience³.

But, amid broader societal changes, college leaders face a challenge: **How can higher education institutions help new students make genuine connections with their peers to foster greater sense of connectedness on campus?**

This report shares the research findings from the College Innovation Network (CIN) evaluation of Nearpeer that was implemented across California University of Pennsylvania (Cal U) and Loyola University, New Orleans (Loyola) in 2021. Nearpeer is a social networking app for students designed to easily and quickly connect students with others who share similar interests – students can share their non-academic

DIFFERENCES IN SELF-REPORTED PEER CONNECTEDNESS BETWEEN NEARPEER USERS GROUPS



*Differences between groups, $t = 3.85$, $***p < .001$, $N = 597$. Data shown for all users across schools; differences within schools also significant (not shown).*

interests and join social groups based on what dorm they live in, what their major is, or what year they plan to graduate.

Our evaluation of Nearpeer through the analysis of product data and voluntary student surveys show high student adoption and engagement across both Cal U and Loyola. The majority of students made at least one peer connection on the Nearpeer app, and many had these connections transition into “real life” friendships. We also found that students who used the Nearpeer app reported a significantly greater sense of peer connectedness mid-way through the fall 2021 term as compared with students who had not used Nearpeer, demonstrating that this EdTech tool can be effective for connecting students.

KEY TAKE-AWAYS:

- **Cal U and Loyola implemented the social networking app Nearpeer prior to the start of the fall 2021 semester to foster connections among students, achieving 48% and 65% adoption rates among freshmen, respectively.**
- **Analysis of user data shows that students are motivated to connect with their peers. Data show high app engagement among students, resulting in hundreds of student interests shared and thousands of peer connections made across both institutions.**
- **Comparisons of survey responses from Nearpeer users and non-users show that students using Nearpeer report significantly greater peer connectedness than non-users, and there was a 16.5% point difference in the number of students agreeing that they enjoy getting to know their peers, with Nearpeer users significantly more likely to agree than non-users.**
- **Students connected over shared music interests, with different music genres being the top added interest at both campuses, occupying about a third of the top interest spots.**
- **Student networking technology centered around non-academic interests appears to be effective in helping students make genuine peer connections and new friends.**





RESULT HIGHLIGHTS

91%

of students made at least one peer connection on Nearpeer

41%

of survey respondents report making at least one "real life" friend because of Nearpeer

14

The average number of peer connections on the app at Cal U

914

The number of unique interests shared by Cal U students

38

The average number of peer connections on the app at Loyola

1,058

The number of unique interests shared by Loyola students



'00s music

The most popular interest shared by students at both Cal U and Loyola

College
Innovation
Network

THE COLLEGE INNOVATION NETWORK (CIN) at WGU Labs is a network of higher education institutions committed to addressing the core challenge of promoting belonging and engagement in the modern higher education environment. We're leveraging technology to build highly engaged learning communities from enrollment through graduation – and beyond. CIN supports educational institutions by identifying areas of need, implementing effective education technology for students, and demonstrating impact through research.

JOIN US AS WE BUILD LEARNING COMMUNITIES WHERE ALL STUDENTS BELONG.

Peers Improve the College Experience and Enhance Learning

BUILDING PEER CONNECTIONS ON CAMPUS

Higher education enrollment has been declining¹ in recent years among broader demographic shifts and global events. As students are making decisions about if and where to enroll for college, admissions and student life leaders are focusing on building peer connections among students to foster a greater sense of connectedness with their institutions to increase enrollment and persistence.

Amid these broader societal changes, college leaders face a challenge: **How can higher education institutions help new students make genuine connections with their peers to foster greater sense of connectedness on campus?**

Fostering genuine connections among incoming students can be challenging for higher education leaders for many reasons. Most notably, the transition to college can be a challenging time for students. Students are tasked with choosing courses, navigating a new campus, and aligning their academic interests with relevant careers. Socially, students are interacting with hundreds or thousands of new peers. But without an easy way to identify peers with shared interests and experiences, making new friends can be difficult.

And making friends is important for students. Evidence suggests that peer connections contribute to broader academic success. A 2021 research study² showed that incoming students who had friends on campus earned higher grades in introductory courses, and showed greater retention than those without. A 2020 research study⁴ found that informal friendship networks were highly influential to students' learning, showing that academic achievement and study habits spread through these friendship networks.

But building peer connections has been especially challenging in the past two years due to the global pandemic. In spring 2020 nearly all campus-based institutions went online for months, cutting off opportunities for students to form organic friendship networks on campus. As the 2020-21 academic year came to a close, our College Innovation Network (CIN) student survey³ found that 92% of students in the CIN network reported experiencing the academic year fully or mostly online.

As a result, 76% of CIN students reported that they felt less connected to their peers in online learning environments after transitioning online due to the pandemic³. Similarly, an experiment conducted in fall 2020 that randomized students to an online versus in-person course⁵ found that students in the online course reported feeling significantly less connected to their peers than those in the in-person course. And a 2021 survey by Inside Higher Ed⁶ also showed that 71% of students report that the lack of connection with peers is a significant challenge posed by online learning.

“**76%** of CIN students reported that they felt **less connected to their peers** in online learning environments after transitioning online due to the pandemic.”

CONCEPTUAL DIAGRAM OF HOW NEARPEER IS DESIGNED TO HELP FOSTER PEER CONNECTIONS.

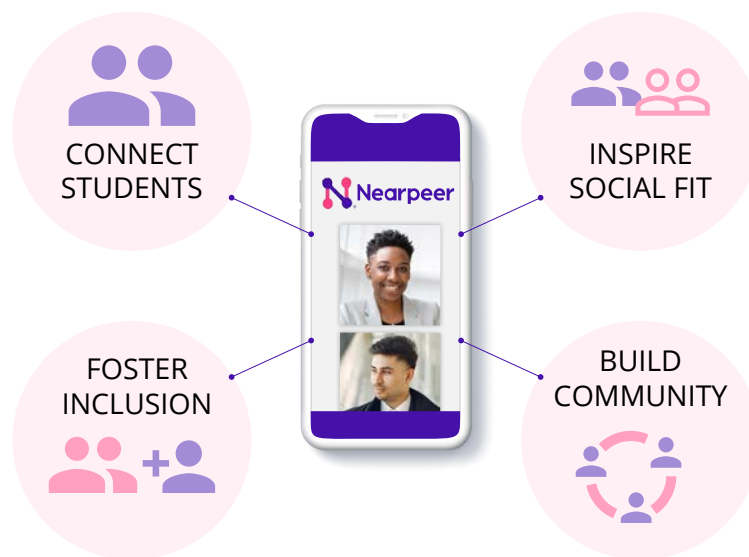


Figure 1

Even as campuses reopened, social distancing, canceled social events, and other safety precautions made organic peer connections difficult to attain and sustain. Bringing students back to campuses in fall 2021 therefore presented unique challenges for traditional campus-based institutions. Not only were incoming freshmen new to campus, but most sophomores were also coming to campus for the first time. In practice, institutions had two cohorts of students who had limited experience navigating campus and few opportunities to make peer connections.

Given the benefits of making peer connections for student success, institutions must innovate fresh approaches to get new students connected with their peers and the broader campus community.

NEARPEER: A NEW WAY FOR STUDENTS TO MEET

This report shares the research findings from the CIN evaluation of Nearpeer, an app designed to connect students, implemented across two CIN institutions in summer and fall of 2021: California University of Pennsylvania (Cal U) and Loyola University, New Orleans (Loyola).

Nearpeer is designed to spark meaningful connections among students across their entire student journey, from the day they are accepted, to the first day on campus, and throughout their college years (see [Figure 1](#)). By using the intuitive app interface, Nearpeer helps students find others with shared interests – students can share their non-academic interests and join social groups based on what dorm they live in, what their major is, or what year they plan to graduate. By making it easy for students to form connections around common interests, Nearpeer can help students make genuine friends on campus.

Our research results, reported below, show high adoption and engagement with Nearpeer across both Cal U and Loyola. We also find that students who used the Nearpeer app reported a significantly greater sense of peer connectedness mid-way through the fall 2021 term as compared with students who had not used Nearpeer. More details about engagement and peer connections are reported below. ■

Evaluating Student Engagement with Nearpeer at California University of Pennsylvania & Loyola University, New Orleans

SOURCES OF DATA TO EVALUATE ENGAGEMENT

Student engagement with Nearpeer was assessed in two ways. First, data collected from student users of the Nearpeer app at each school provides insight to the full Nearpeer student experience, such as number of connections, student interests, and user growth over time (see [Figure 2](#)).

Second, CIN sent surveys to all students who were eligible to join the app in October 2021, and respondents were compensated \$10 for completing the survey. The survey asked students about Nearpeer's effectiveness for making new friends and their use of the app, in addition to general questions about their sense of connectedness with peers at their school. Because we sent surveys to all eligible students, which included some students who decided to not use Nearpeer, we were able to statistically compare Nearpeer users and non-users (see [Figure 3](#)) on general questions to examine whether use of Nearpeer is associated with greater feelings of peer connectedness.

Sources of data (i.e., from the Nearpeer app or from the student survey) are reported throughout in the figure captions.

NEARPEER USERS INCREASED ACROSS FALL 2021 TERM

Cal U and Loyola implemented Nearpeer prior to the start of the fall 2021 term. The goal of implementing Nearpeer prior to students' arrival on campus is to foster belonging with the institution and start building peer connections from the point of enrollment, through orientation, and across students' term.

PROPORTIONS OF NEARPEER USER DATA FROM EACH SCHOOL. N = 1,480

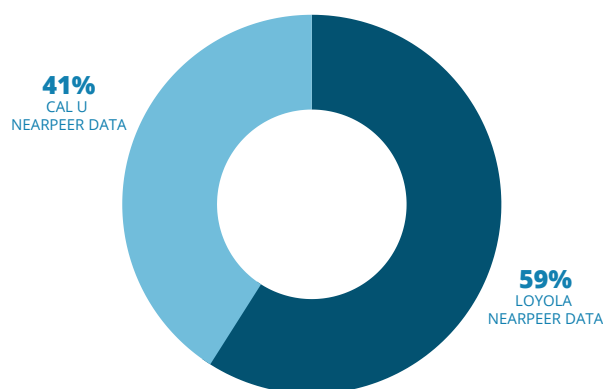


Figure 2

PROPORTIONS OF SURVEY RESPONDENTS WHO ARE NEARPEER USERS (60%) AND NON-USERS (40%) BY SCHOOL. N = 597

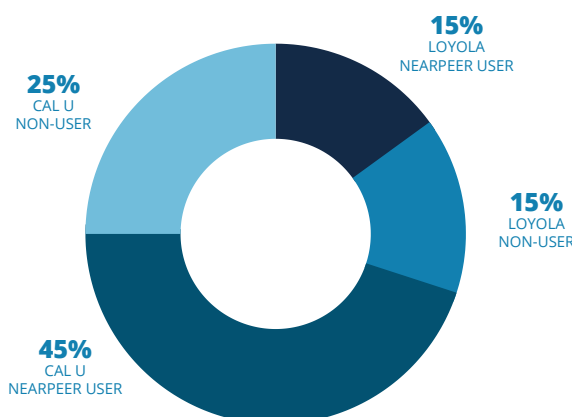


Figure 3

USER GROWTH FOR NEARPEER OVER FALL TERM AT CAL U AND LOYOLA.

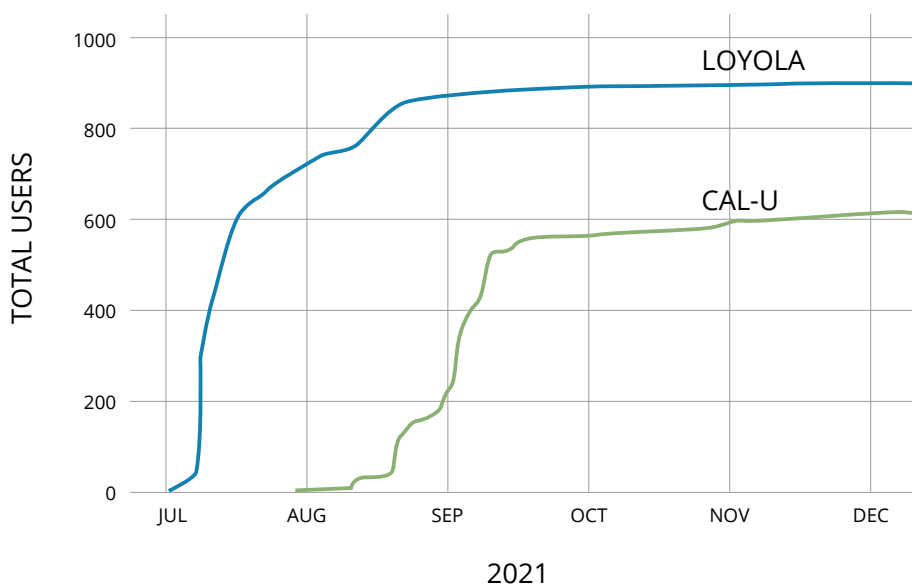


Figure 4

Differences in launch dates can be seen in [Figure 4](#) showing the user growth across both universities. Loyola integrated Nearpeer more closely with enrollment prior to the start of the semester, whereas Cal U integrated Nearpeer's launch more closely with new student orientation and campus start dates. It is also important to note that Loyola suffered the impacts of Hurricane Ida during the first month of the fall 2021 semester.

Both institutions focused primarily on incoming freshmen as their target group for implementing Nearpeer given the benefits of new students feeling connected with their chosen campus community. [Figure 5](#) shows the percent of student users by graduating class. Cal U saw 74% of their total users as freshmen, with 13% being sophomores. Similarly, Loyola's Nearpeer users were 67% freshmen in fall 2021 and 19% were sophomores. Overall, Cal U achieved 48% adoption amongst freshmen and Loyola achieved a 65% adoption amongst incoming freshmen.

PERCENT OF STUDENTS USING NEARPEER AT CAL U (LEFT) AND LOYOLA (RIGHT) BY GRADUATING CLASS.

N = 1,480

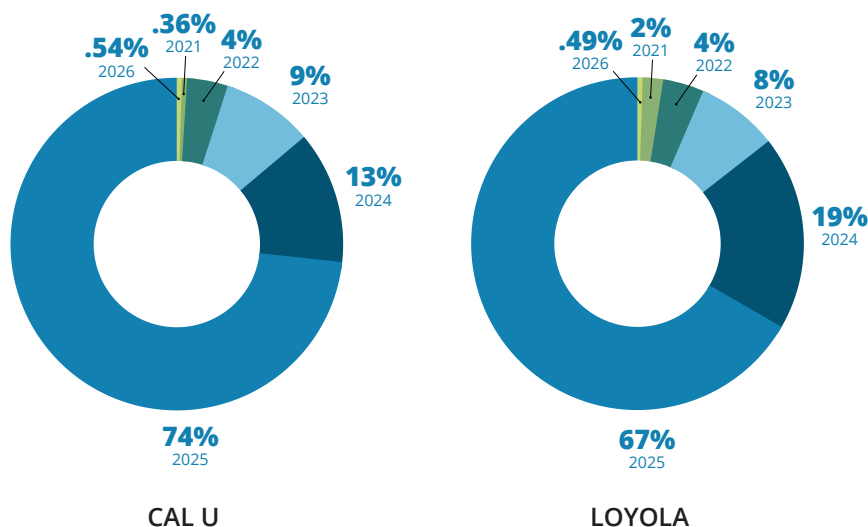


Figure 5



Full-Time Status

99%

98%

Enrolled in
in-person classes

98%

95%

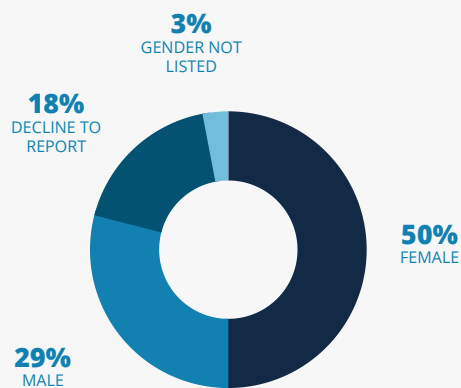
Living on Campus

63%

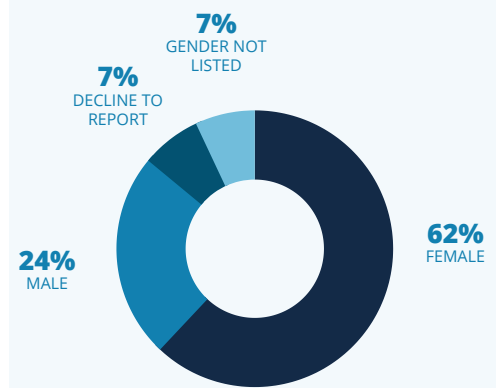
67%

SELF-REPORTED
GENDER OF
STUDENTS USING
NEARPEER AT
CAL U (LEFT) AND
LOYOLA (RIGHT).

N = 1,480



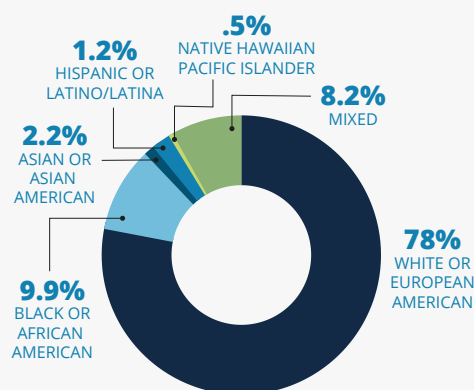
CAL U



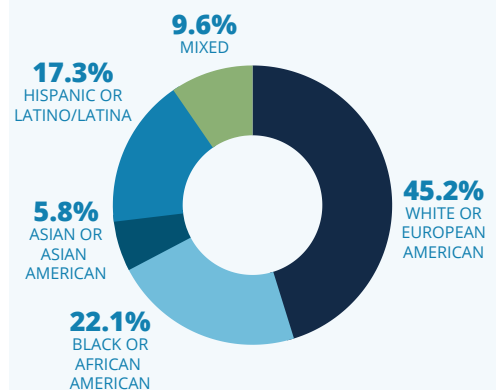
LOYOLA

Figure 6

SELF-REPORTED
RACE/ETHNICITY
OF STUDENT
SURVEY
RESPONDENTS AT
CAL U (LEFT; N =
404) AND LOYOLA
(RIGHT; N = 104)



CAL U



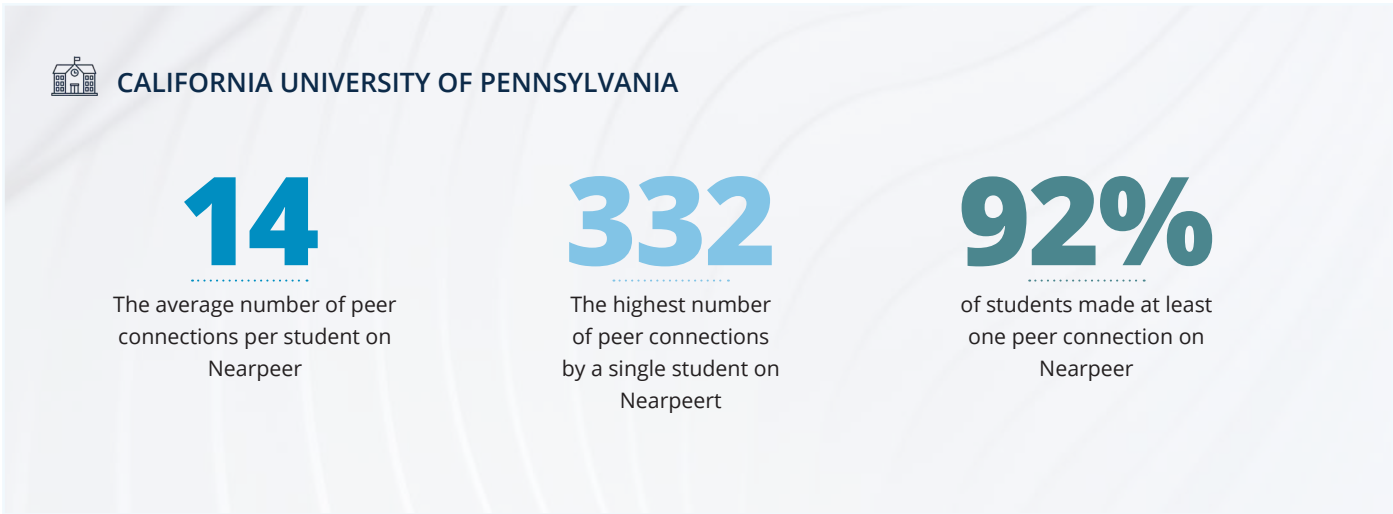
LOYOLA

Figure 7

*data based on Nearpeer product data

90%+ OF CAL U AND LOYOLA NEARPEER USERS MADE PEER CONNECTIONS

Nearpeer is designed to connect students and foster greater in-person engagement among peers on campus. The primary function of the Nearpeer app is to make peer connections: when one student requests to connect with another student and then that student accepts the request. By finding peers on campus who share similar interests, the Nearpeer app proves effective at connecting students.



DISTRIBUTION OF TOTAL PEER CONNECTIONS BY NUMBER OF STUDENTS AT CAL U. DATA FROM THE NEARPEER APP. N = 610

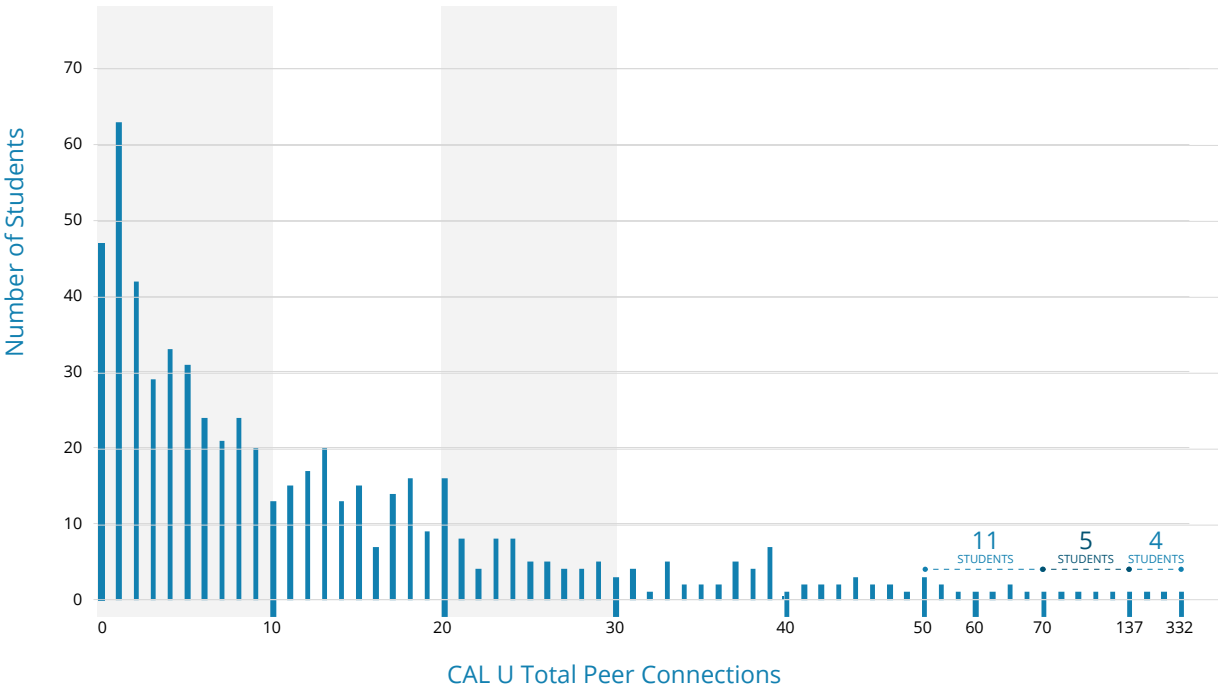


Figure 8



38

The average number of peer connections per student on Nearpeer

603

The highest number of peer connections by a single student on Nearpeer

90%

of students made at least one peer connection on Nearpeer

DISTRIBUTION OF TOTAL PEER CONNECTIONS BY NUMBER OF STUDENTS AT LOYOLA. DATA FROM THE NEARPEER APP. N = 870

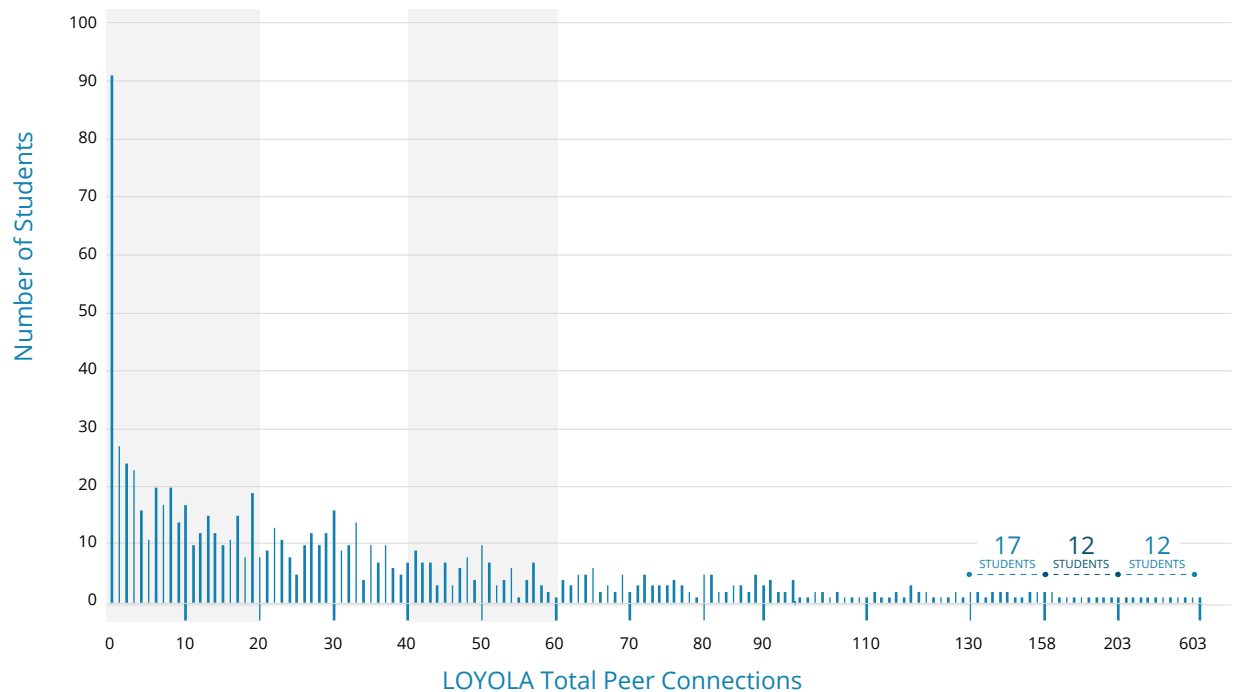


Figure 9

STUDENTS USING NEARPEER REPORT GREATER SENSE OF PEER CONNECTEDNESS THAN NON-USERS

In our survey to students, all respondents at Cal U and Loyola - regardless of whether they were using Nearpeer or not - responded to specific questions about their sense of connectedness with their peers (see [Box 1](#)).

Box 1. Items assessing peer connectedness:

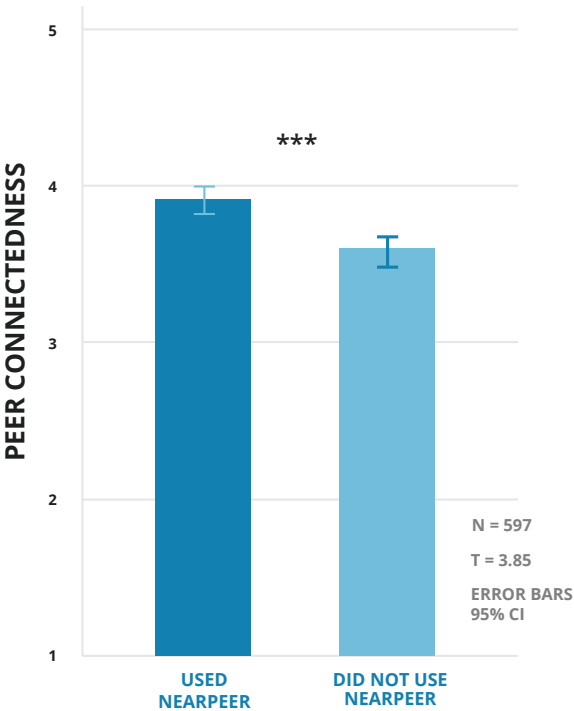
- I FEEL **CONNECTED TO MY PEERS** AT [LOYOLA/CALIFORNIA] UNIVERSITY.
- I ENJOY **GETTING TO KNOW MY PEERS** AT [LOYOLA/CALIFORNIA] UNIVERSITY.

Students responded using a 5-point scale with **1 = strongly disagree** and **5 = strongly agree**.

An analysis of the differences in students' average score on the two peer connectedness items shows that students using Nearpeer reported significantly greater peer connectedness on average than students who were not using Nearpeer (see [Figure 10](#)).

The difference in peer connectedness among Nearpeer users and non-users can also be seen in the distribution of students' responses to the individual items (see [Figure 11](#)). There is an 11.7 percentage point difference between Nearpeer users and non-users agreeing to the statement

DIFFERENCES IN SELF-REPORTED PEER CONNECTEDNESS BETWEEN NEARPEER USERS GROUPS



Differences between groups, $t = 3.85$, $***p < .001$, $N = 597$. Data shown for all users across schools; differences within schools also significant (not shown).

Figure 10

FREQUENCIES OF RESPONSES FOR PEER CONNECTEDNESS ITEMS BY NEARPEER USER GROUPS. N = 597

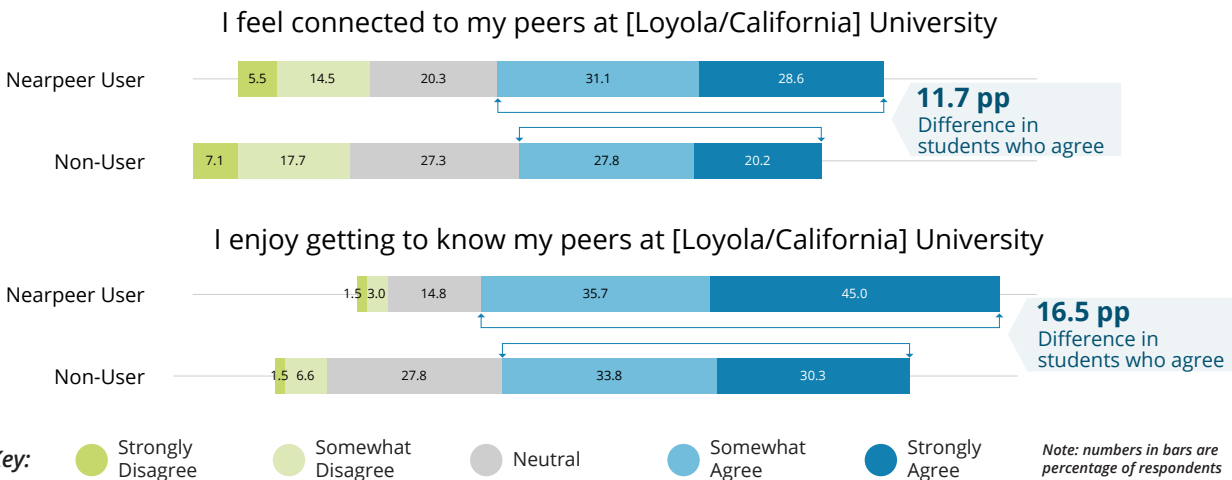


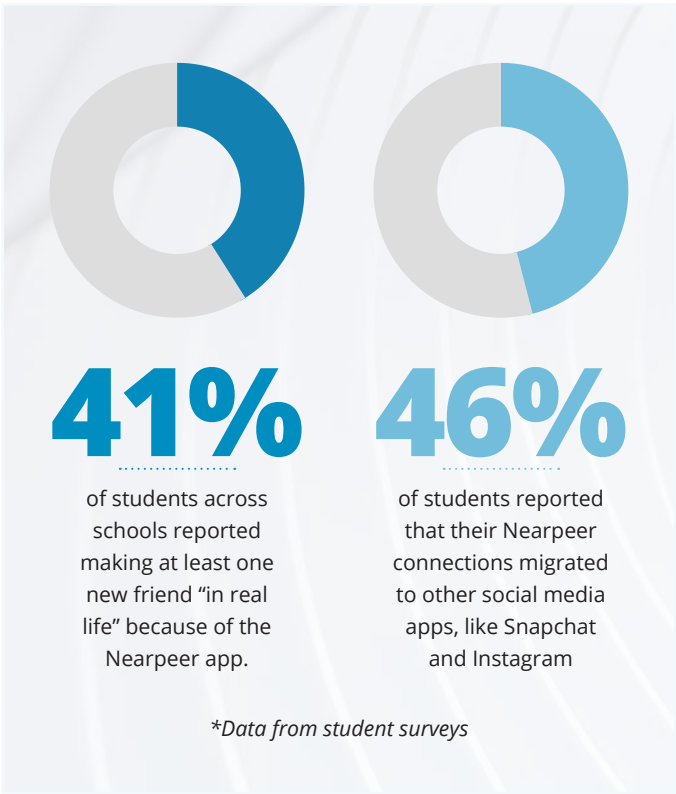
Figure 11

“I feel connected to my peers at [Loyola/California] University” with Nearpeer users more likely to endorse that statement. Similarly, we see a 16.5 percentage point difference between Nearpeer users and non-users agreeing to the statement “I enjoy getting to know my peers at [Loyola/California] University” again with Nearpeer users more likely to endorse that statement.

We also compared students’ responses to questions about their overall sense of belonging, extraversion, perceptions of university support, and general university satisfaction. There were no significant differences found between Nearpeer users and non-users. These data are located in the Appendix.

Because Nearpeer is an opt-in app for peer connections, it is possible that students who are most motivated to connect socially are also most likely to use the app. In our student survey we asked all students, users and non-users, to respond to two items assessing their sociability (“I enjoy making new friends” and “In social situations, I am usually the one to make the first move”). Users of the Nearpeer app reported marginally higher values on these items ($t = 2.245, p = .025$), but this difference did not change the significant differences in peer connectedness reported above when accounted for.

A challenge facing higher education leaders, then, is how to attract the students that could most benefit from tools to foster peer connections: the least sociable students. University leaders need to build the platforms for connections to flourish but also be intentional about bringing those students who are least likely to engage into the platform. Ensuring that students know about the available tools to engage with peers and the documented benefits of engaging with peers may increase student motivations to opt-in to these kinds of opportunities.



The overall pattern of results suggests that **use of the Nearpeer app is an effective tool for students to make friends and feel a greater sense of connectedness to their peers** at Cal U and Loyola.

STUDENTS CONNECT OVER COMMON INTERESTS

Nearpeer not only connects students in similar academic groups such as majors or programs, but also across non-academic interests. Students are able to customize their profile and list up to hundreds of different interests, which Nearpeer uses to suggest peer connections. Using the Nearpeer app data, we are able to examine the top interests among students at Cal U and Loyola and the extent to which students connected with each other.

STUDENT INTERESTS	CAL U	LOYOLA
The number of unique interests	914	1,058
The percent of interests added to at least two student profiles	67%	75%
The percent of interests added to at least 10 student profiles	14%	30%

CAL U STUDENT INTERESTS AS REPORTED ON THE NEARPEER APP AND NUMBER OF STUDENTS ADDING THAT INTEREST TO THEIR PROFILE. ONLY INTERESTS ADDED BY 10+ STUDENTS SHOWN HERE.

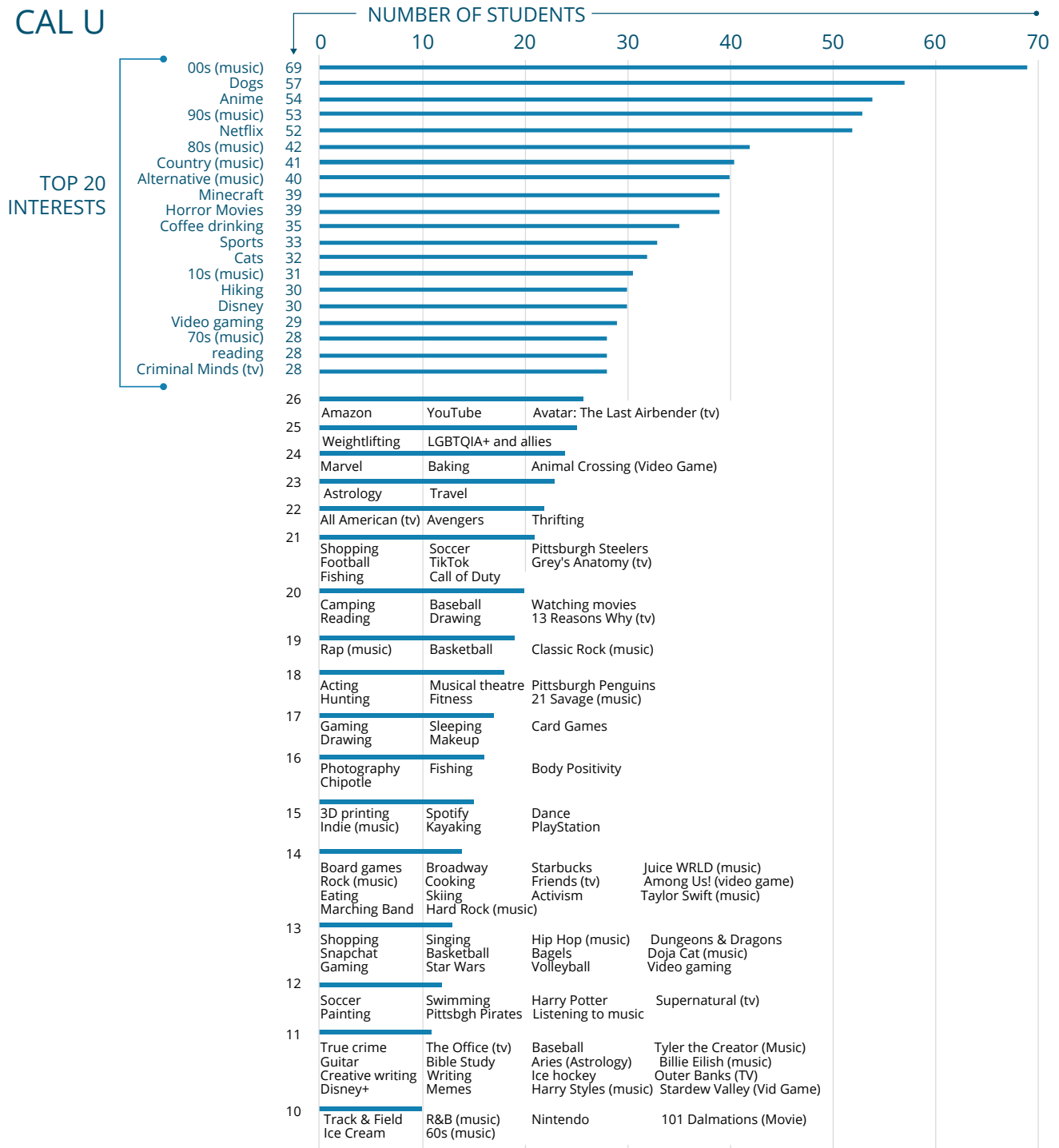


Figure 12

LOYOLA STUDENT INTERESTS AS REPORTED ON THE NEARPEER APP AND NUMBER OF STUDENTS ADDING THAT INTEREST TO THEIR PROFILE. ONLY INTERESTS ADDED BY 30+ STUDENTS SHOWN HERE.

LOYOLA

TOP 20 INTERESTS

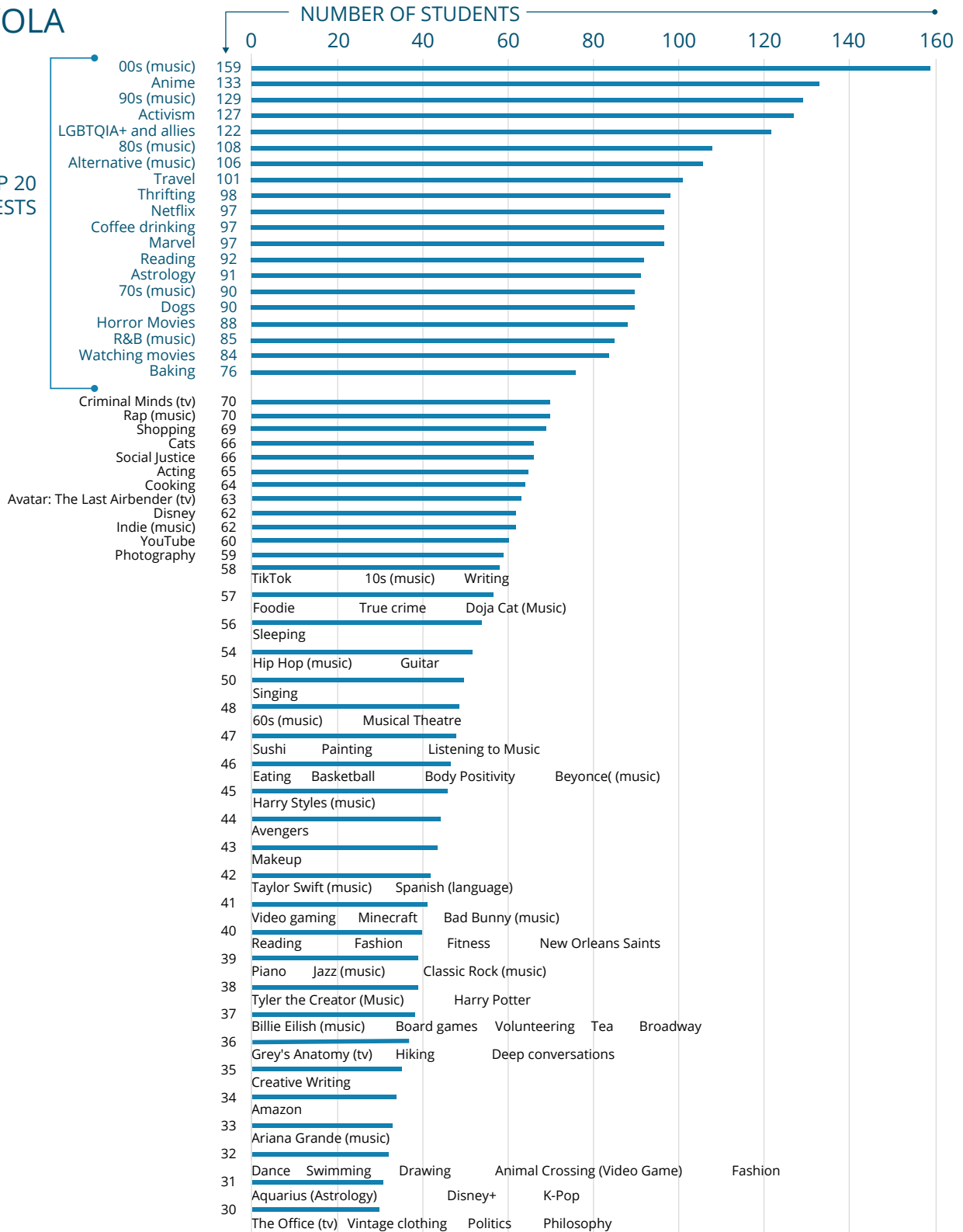


Figure 13

Analyses of student interest data show some interesting similarities and differences among the Cal U and Loyola students. Similarly, both campuses' students connect over shared music interests. Students at both campuses have music, and specifically "00's music," occupying the top spot - the most common interest among all students on the app. And at both campuses, 40% of the top 10 interests are music categories. Also notable is the top ranking of "Anime" at both campuses, occupying the third spot at Cal U and the second spot at Loyola. Coffee, horror movies, and Netflix round out top similarities among students at both campuses.

There is a notable difference in interests across campuses, however. Loyola has "Activism" and related interests in their top 10 whereas these interests do not show up in the top 20 interests at Cal U. This may be in part driven by two notable differences between the campuses. Loyola has greater race and ethnic diversity among their students than Cal U (see [Figure 7](#)), and Loyola is located in a major urban city whereas Cal U is located on the far outskirts of the closest major city.

STUDENTS ENJOY THE NEARPEER APP EXPERIENCE

Nearpeer is designed to be an easy to use and engaging networking app for students. We asked students in the survey what they liked most about the Nearpeer app. "Using Nearpeer helped me feel more comfortable

about going to college and a bit less nervous about making friends," said one Loyola student.

Students praised the user experience (UX) of the Nearpeer platform in their comments ([Figure 14](#)), noting many positive in-app features such as group chat and quick set up of their profiles. Being able to find others with the same interests and being easily able to connect with peers were also big hits with student users. A Cal U student noted that "I am able to connect with people I would usually never talk to."

Our surveys also asked Nearpeer users to report about their experience with Nearpeer and its usability ([Figure 15](#)). The ease of use also stood out here, with 63% of students agreeing that "Nearpeer was easy to use." ■

“Using Nearpeer helped me feel
MORE COMFORTABLE
about going to college and a bit
LESS NERVOUS
about making friends.”
- Loyola Student

CATEGORIES OF STUDENT RESPONSES WHEN ASKED WHAT THEY LIKED MOST ABOUT NEARPEER. N = 214

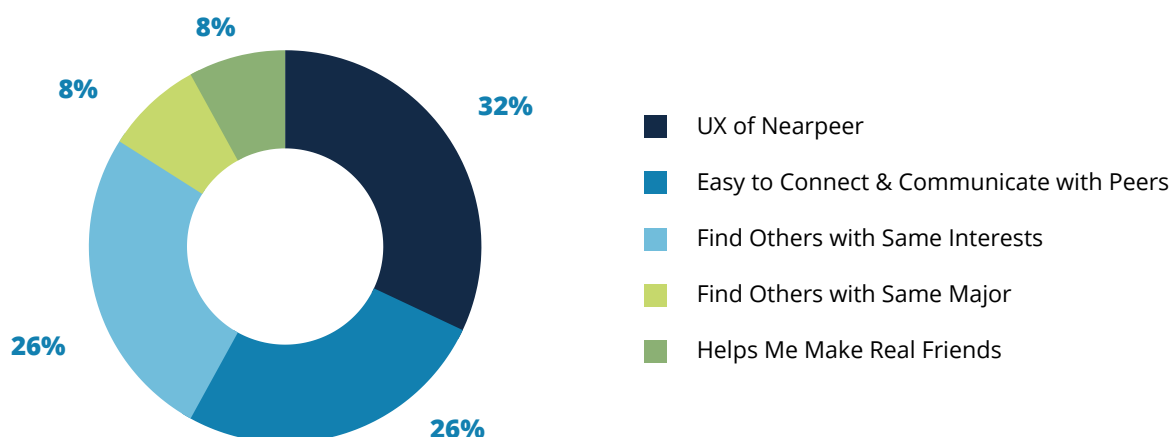


Figure 14

NEARPEER USER RESPONSES TO SURVEY QUESTIONS ABOUT THEIR NEARPEER EXPERIENCE. N = 363

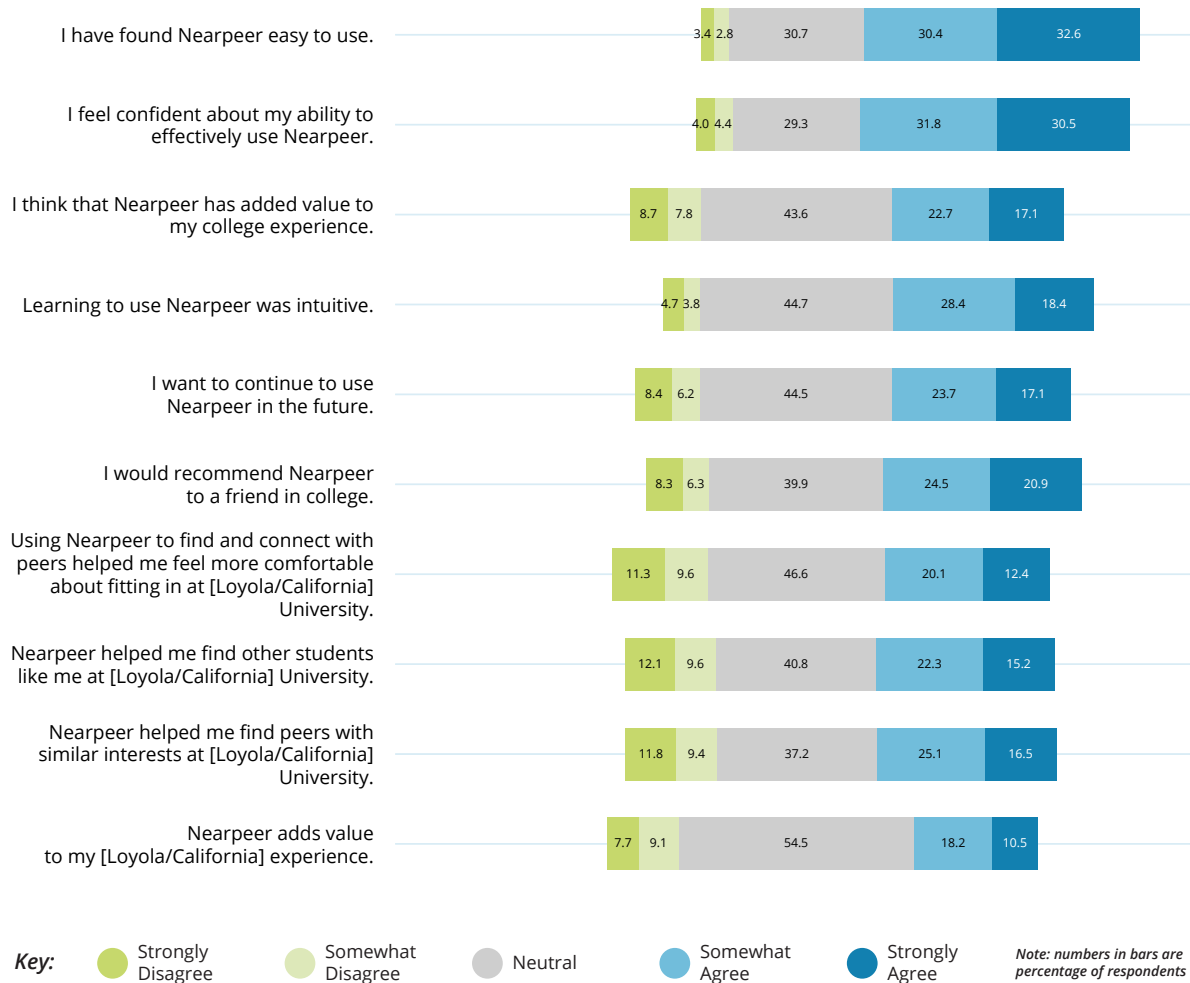


Figure 15



Strategies for Fostering Authentic Student Connections on Campus

The start of college can be an overwhelming time for students. Although college campuses are intensely social spaces by design, it can be challenging for students to find peers with whom they connect beyond academics.

The challenge facing higher education institutions today is creating quick, effective, and safe ways for students to connect with each other.

New technology innovations can create effective means for students to find others like them in a sea of new faces. Amid the new challenges and barriers to creating authentic student connections, institutional leaders at California University of Pennsylvania (Cal U) and Loyola University, New Orleans (Loyola) implemented Nearpeer – a social networking app for students – to help new students easily find peers to connect with.

“We know from 40+ years of retention research that folks need to feel they belong to remain engaged and enrolled,” says Elizabeth Rainey, Executive Director of Pan-American Life Student Success Center at Loyola. “COVID-19 interrupted the traditional ways of building connections through big campus events and

student organizations, but technology allows for a less overwhelming and safer way to connect.”

The results of our research evaluating student engagement with Nearpeer and subsequent peer connections at Cal U and Loyola show that this tool helped students to make cross-campus connections with others who share similar interests and, importantly, that these connections migrate offline to “real life” friends.

Every campus is unique, and there are many ways to help students connect. This look into how Nearpeer positively impacted students at Cal U and Loyola suggest several strategies that other campuses can adopt when developing new ways to get their students connected with one another.

So, what should higher education leaders keep in mind when fostering authentic peer connections on campus?

We spoke with several leaders across Cal U and Loyola about their experiences connecting students on campus to gather advice that others in their position can apply when fostering peer engagement on their own campuses.



BUILD ALIGNMENT ACROSS CAMPUS DEPARTMENTS AND LEADERS

Every campus leader involved in the student engagement initiatives at Cal U and Loyola emphasized the importance of building alignment across university teams. Implementing new tools for students to connect is a true campus-wide effort.

Engaging students across their entire educational journey - from the point of admission, through enrollment and orientation, and across their first term - requires initiative leaders to get buy-in from other leaders across the relevant departments. By clearly emphasizing the importance of cross-department collaboration, and connecting your initiative to broader university strategic objectives, leaders can help gain buy-in and ensure that students can engage and start connecting right away.



STUDENTS ARE MORE THAN THEIR ACADEMICS

Although students on campus share the common goal of furthering their education, students have full lives beyond the classroom. They have ample opportunities to meet others in their courses, for example, but how can students find others who are interested in Anime, Minecraft, or Thrifting?

It's vital to remember that students want to find others with similar interests that go beyond their academics. In our research, we found that students took the opportunity to share hundreds of unique interests, the majority of which were shared by at least one other student.

"There is a better sense of connectivity and empathy when students know one another on a level deeper than a classmate, floor buddy, or someone they've seen on campus," shared Dale Hall, Assistant Director for Student Life at Loyola.

When implementing or designing new student engagement tools, or even organizing student events, remember that students crave connections beyond their classes or major. Find creative ways for students to share their hobbies and extracurricular interests with each other.



GET THE WORD OUT

Our research showed that a key success factor in getting students to opt-in to social engagement opportunities was timing. The campuses we studied implemented Neerpeer before students' first day, making it an embedded component of their academic experience and an integral part of the student journey.

Administrative leadership in fostering authentic connections starts from a student's first engagement with the university, not their first day of class. Students should have clear opportunities and means of engagement with other students from the day they are admitted to your university – don't wait! "What is often overlooked in retention strategies is the need for students to remain connected and feel part of the campus community before they take their first course," says Brenda Fredette, Dean of Eberly College of Science and Technology at Cal U.

Engaging students early and often requires cohesive and consistent communications strategies so that students are aware of the opportunities available to them, and can get engaged right away. This, however, requires alignment across university teams.



STAY EXCLUSIVE TO YOUR CAMPUS COMMUNITY

When designing student engagement opportunities, it may be assumed that there are plenty of ways for students to connect with one another on traditional social media. But by remaining exclusive to your campus community, students see a clear value-add to opt-in to opportunities that can help them feel connected with others on campus specifically.

"I love the idea behind Neerpeer, it allows students to get to know the other members of the campus community they are about to join and who they are going to be starting their college journey with," says Daniel Harris, Assistant Director of Student Life at Loyola.

If your goal is to build connections among students on your campus, then keep the initiative exclusive to your campus. As previous research has shown, peers with friends on campus are more likely to pass introductory courses and, for first generation students, are retained at higher rates². ■

Keeping Students Connected for Academic Success

Peer connections improve the student experience, and can even improve academic outcomes^{2,4}. But getting new students on campus connected with the broader community of students can be challenging. And this challenge was made even more extraordinary due to the global pandemic that impacted courses, campuses, and social events.

What students needed was a way to quickly and easily find new friends on campus who share similar interests. California University of Pennsylvania (Cal U) and Loyola University, New Orleans (Loyola) recognized this need among their students, especially incoming freshmen and returning sophomores, and implemented Nearpeer as a tool to get their students connected.

The research results shared in this report show how an education technology product designed around connecting students across genuine shared interests can promote peer connectedness on campus and help foster real friendships. Our data show high adoption of Nearpeer among students, that the majority of students have interests that are shared by others on campus, and a user-friendly app can help connect students with others beyond their academics. Importantly, our research shows that students who used Nearpeer reported greater peer connectedness as compared to students who did not use Nearpeer, demonstrating that EdTech tools leveraging shared interests can be effective for connecting students. ■

College Innovation Network

THE COLLEGE INNOVATION NETWORK (CIN) at WGU Labs is a network of higher education institutions committed to addressing the core challenge of promoting belonging and engagement in the modern higher education environment. We're leveraging technology to build highly engaged learning communities from enrollment through graduation – and beyond. CIN supports educational institutions by identifying areas of need, implementing effective education technology for students, and demonstrating impact through research

JOIN US AS WE BUILD LEARNING COMMUNITIES WHERE ALL STUDENTS BELONG.

References

1. [Fall 2021 Current term enrollment estimates](#) (2022, January). *National Student Clearinghouse Research Center*.
2. Binning, K. R., Blatt, L. R., Chen, S., & Votruba-Drzal, E. (2021). [Going to college with a posse: How having high school peers on campus supports college achievement](#). *AERA Open*, 7, 1-18.
3. Barbaro, N. (2021). [The new digital divide: How edtech self-efficacy is shaping the online student learning experience in higher ed](#). *College Innovation Network EdTech Student Survey Series*.
4. Dokuka, S., Valeeva, D., & Yudkevich, M. (2020). [How academic achievement spreads: The role of distinct social networks in academic performance diffusion](#). *Plos one*, 15, e0236737.
5. Kofoed, M. S., Gebhart, L., Gilmore, D., & Moschitto, R. (2021, May). [Zooming to class?: Experimental evidence on college students' online learning during COVID-19](#). *IZA Institute of Labor Economics*.
6. [Student voice survey](#) (2021, March). *Inside Higher Ed*.

Appendix

All survey respondents also completed measures belonging, and perceptions of support and satisfaction with their university. There were no significant differences across user groups for these measures. The aggregate to these items are shown in Figure A1. ■

STUDENTS' AGREEMENT WITH STATEMENTS ABOUT BELONGING, UNIVERSITY SUPPORT AND ENGAGEMENT. N = 624

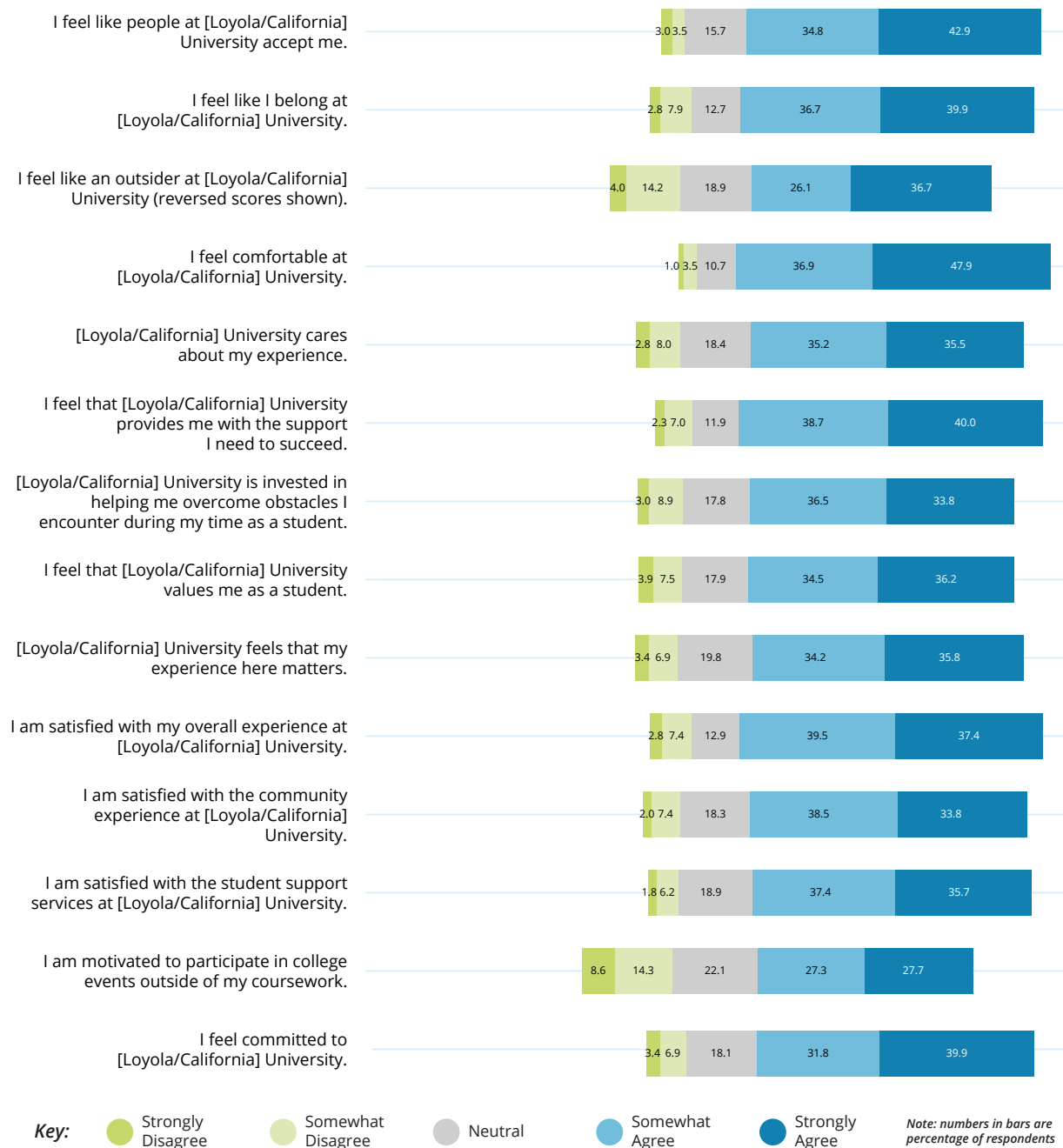


Figure A1

CALIFORNIA UNIVERSITY

OF PENNSYLVANIA



Nearpeer

College
Innovation
Network

With world-class academics, state-of-the-art facilities and proximity to Pittsburgh, **CALIFORNIA UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA** offers more than just learning. Accredited and affordable, Cal U provides students with an excellent educational experience at a tremendous value. Our professors are some of the best in their fields, committed to academic excellence and intellectual rigor, and offering real-world experience.

LOYOLA UNIVERSITY, NEW ORLEANS is a Catholic, Jesuit university located in the heart of the picturesque Uptown neighborhood of New Orleans. For more than 100 years, Loyola has helped shape the lives of its students, as well as the history of the city and the world, through educating men and women in the Jesuit traditions of academic excellence and service to others. Loyola's more than 50,000 living graduates serve as catalysts for change in their communities as they exemplify the comprehensive, values-laden education received at Loyola.

NEARPEER helps higher ed leaders improve enrollment, equity, and the student experience. Our peer-to-peer engagement platform and matching algorithms are highly effective as a catalyst for meaningful, 1:1 connection for students—and separately, for parents and family members. Each institution's exclusive, virtual peer network reinforces a sense of belonging and community throughout the student lifecycle, which results in increased yield, reduced melt, and improved persistence. Learn more at nearpeer.com.

THE COLLEGE INNOVATION NETWORK (CIN) at WGU Labs is a network of higher education institutions committed to addressing the core challenge of promoting belonging and engagement in the modern higher education environment. We're leveraging technology to build highly engaged learning communities from enrollment through graduation – and beyond. CIN supports educational institutions by identifying areas of need, implementing effective education technology for students, and demonstrating impact through research. Join us as we build learning communities where all students belong. Learn more about CIN at: www.wgulabs.org/cin

REPORT CONTRIBUTIONS

This research was made possible through the collaboration of Brenda Fredette, Thomas Wickham, Jill Loop, Tracey Sheetz, and Keli Henderson at California University of Pennsylvania; Elizabeth Rainey, Daniel Harris, and Dale Hall of Loyola University of New Orleans; and Christopher Quinn and Dustin Manocha at Nearpeer. Nicole Barbaro at WGU Labs designed the study, analyzed data, and wrote the report. Omid Fotuhi, Betheny Gross, Christina Ross, Natalie Berkey, and Erika Wandsneider at WGU Labs provided critical revisions to the report. The report was designed by Christine McDonough and CallyAnn Hamilton at WGU Labs. The work was made possible, in part, by funding provided to the College Innovation Network by the Charles Koch Foundation.

Inquiries about this report can be addressed to cin@wgulabs.org

Citation:

College Innovation Network (2022, March). Making Peer Connections with Nearpeer at California University of Pennsylvania and Loyola University, New Orleans. *CIN Evaluation and Impact Report*.

