The Malone Center and The Career Academy (TCA)
Peer Brokering of Opportunities Across Settings

Making Connections Strategy 4
A Near-peer Mentorship Model to Support Transitions to STEM Academic and Career Opportunities Through Mentorship

Maggie Dahn and Kylie Peppler
Connected Learning Lab, University of California, Irvine

A key design principle of making connections, brokering across settings, focuses on how individuals connect youth to specific learning opportunities beyond their organizations. Brokering can occur through peer-to-peer relationships (e.g., one youth telling another about a STEM summer camp opportunity) or through mentor or educator-initiated means (e.g., a teacher referring a student to a robotics after school program). Brokering emphasizes the interpersonal ways peers and mentors connect youth to additional opportunities to help youth build relationships that expand their current networks (Ito et al., 2020).

Equity-oriented practices like brokering support youth identity development, social capital building, and interest-driven learning through connecting youth to tangible learning opportunities (e.g., Ching et al., 2015). A partnership between The Career Academy (TCA) and The Malone Center (also, Malone Community Center or Malone) brokered and coordinated through Nebraska’s Beyond School Bells, presents a near-peer mentoring program that exemplifies how brokering within the program can support STEM transitions for girls to academic and career opportunities. As a dual-credit institution, TCA functions as a partnership between Lincoln Public Schools and Southeast Community College. At TCA, high school juniors and seniors choose their own career pathways and take courses aligned with particular specialties (e.g., engineering, information technology, health sciences) that introduce them to specific STEM-related careers and also offer college credit.

The Malone Center is a nonprofit organization founded in Lincoln in 1955 during the civil rights era to “improve social and economic conditions and increase understanding between all races” and continues to “dedicated to creating unity and prosperity throughout Lincoln, Nebraska while honoring African American heritage” (Malone Community Center, 2020). Malone provides access to a range of social, educational, employment, and cultural services for the families, youth, and seniors it serves. Holistically, its programs focus on education, community outreach and support, youth leadership and development, and youth athletics. Tyrina (Operations Director at Malone) explains that the community center serves “probably 98-99% people of color” and “has a lot of resources and a lot of people [they] can connect with to get children what they need.” Through a number of different programs (e.g., college tours, an entrepreneurship program, maternal wellness, a teen program) they serve “about 300 kids” in the area.

Figure 1. Maps show physical location and distance between Malone and TCA
Located in a historically Black neighborhood in Lincoln, Joshua (Director at TCA) describes Malone as “influential” in the community. Joshua also expressed the need for TCA “to be more of a presence in different communities in Lincoln” and to “make a more concentrated attempt to connect with students of color” and populations not as well represented at TCA. For reference, in its 7th year, TCA serves 663 students, 35% of whom are nonwhite with over half on free or reduced-lunch as scholarship recipients. In pursuit of these aims and to “do better,” through a partnership with Malone fostered by the BSB network connection, the near-peer mentorship program model began to take shape to support STEM transitions for girls between Malone and TCA (note: though not part of the official research period, it will be possible to track which, if any, of the girls who participated in the near-peer mentorship program eventually enroll at TCA as juniors or seniors). For the near-peer mentorship making connections project, 12-15 3rd-8th grade girls from Malone meet with TCA near-peer mentors three times a month to learn about different STEM opportunities through TCA.

**Background on Adult and Near-Peer Brokers**

Joshua (Director at The Career Academy) started teaching in 2005, remaining in the classroom for five years and developing a background in special education before transitioning into administration. His work in education instilled in him the conviction that real-world experiences are of immense value for learning. As a teacher, he recalled designing learning experiences in which his students created school stores and coffee shops for staff because he thought that “was the best way for them to learn to read, to write, and to do math.” As an administrator at a more traditional school in Lincoln, Joshua became disillusioned with the pressures of district initiatives driven by standardized testing requirements and began searching for other options that aligned with his educational values. He eventually found a great match in his role as Director of The Career Academy (TCA) where students have opportunities to build from their interests and choose career and specialization pathways. As the Director, Joshua has a great amount of freedom and flexibility in how he approaches his work. He explained:

“The Career Academy is a dual credit institution of learning where students get to choose their pathway that they want to focus on. We have more skilled trades like welding, construction, machining, and we have other pathways that are geared towards a four-year college like K-12 education, agriculture/biotech science, criminal justice, so we meet the whole spectrum of students. But I think we provide a purpose for kids and we really treat our students like the adults that we ask them to be when they come out here, and I just feel like it's the right way to do education.”

Tyrina (Operations Director at Malone) explains that her role at Malone is to have a birds-eye view in “making sure that programs are doing what they are supposed to do,” making sure that the building is in order and compliance, and coordinating the use of their physical space. Beyond her day-to-day responsibilities, Tyrina’s passion and investment in her work and the Malone community is acutely evident, as she explained:

“I really am passionate about helping others and helping others that look like me. And helping young girls. Because I can only live my life as a Black woman and a woman of color, and so I’m really passionate about breaking that cycle of what I see young girls of color know. I’m pretty much the only person in my family who graduated from college so I have always kind of paved my way. I was in a whole bunch of programs growing up that it took one person to touch my life to make me be like ‘I want something different.”

Tyrina explains that she knows “exactly” who the person was to help her know she wanted something “more” in life – she considers them a mentor. Through how she approaches her role, it’s clear Tyrina may be that person for one (or more) of the kids with whom she works. Though not part of her official responsibilities, Tyrina explained:

“My passion is so big that we have all these children that are in this building that I’ve got to know — I don’t have to, but I want to — so I’ve got to know the kids, and I actually just started a step team because I’m just so passionate about what we can do for the kids that don’t play basketball, who don’t play football, who don’t run track, who don’t play volleyball, to make sure that they are involved, to make sure they are going to be able to work as a team when they are older…to be able to commit to things, to be able to learn new things.”
Building from her personal experiences and commitment to the kids and community Malone serves, Tyrina brings her whole self to her role. She also explained that she will not feel like she has met her personal goals until people “see [women of color] in masses — lots of women of color doctors, lots of women of color lawyers.” Though she had only been in her role for 8 months at the time of our first interview, Tyrina described the way she assumes her role as about “noticing” and “paying attention” like she does as a mom such as having “a sandwich and chips and juice ready” if children are at Malone later than expected because “when I’m a mom I think of those things.”

Figure 2. Organization of Beyond School Bells and NE organizations participation in the making connections project

**Near-Peer Mentorship Model to Support STEM Transitions**

Joshua explained that “STEM is just part of who TCA is” and that it’s built into the different career pathways. For the making connections project, they decided to prioritize the health sciences, biotech, and agriculture pathways and may also cover engineering if time allows within the program. The idea for the design of the near-peer mentorship model to support STEM transitions for girls came from Joshua’s hope to connect to younger students and communities currently underrepresented at TCA since he has an interest in working with elementary school students because that’s when “we set the foundation for students either way...especially in that 3rd to 5th grade time.” He explained that the near-peer model came from the following general idea:

“About how we can do a better job working with students and so the concept of the near-peer mentality of you know, let me get out of the way as a white man in his 40s who doesn’t relate well to a fourth grader who is in a traditionally Black community, and so let’s bring in teenagers who are from the community themselves who love education, who are passionate about it and have a story to tell, and let them lead the way.”

Joshua repeatedly acknowledged the importance of paying the near-peer mentors to engage in the work, both from the reality that “if we’re not paying them, we’re not going to get them” and the belief that they need to “honor their time.” In addition to a stipend for their work, Joshua is also offering the near-peer mentors a $1000 scholarship toward college at the end of the program. To Joshua, the pay is about “attracting quality” near-peer mentors to “make it worth their time and effort.” For this project, Joshua picked the two near-peer mentors, explaining that he wanted students who could “connect” with the younger kids, who are “engaging” and “smart,” and “somebody who these kids will look up to.” Joshua purposefully asked two Black girls from TCA to participate since he thought it was important for students from Malone Community Center to engage with mentors who looked like them, who may have had some similar life experiences. He also acknowledged that these students would perhaps not normally volunteer for this type of opportunity and described “some hesitancy” when he approached them. However, the attractive pay and willingness to work around their personal schedules helped them to take up the opportunity. In sum, the near-peer mentorship model was designed to support both the mentees who are being mentored to transition into STEM areas, as well as the near-peers who
are also doing their own transitioning as they prepare for college and careers beyond high school (both near-peer mentors are interested in going into health sciences). Tyrina hopes that the partnership with TCA will spark girls’ interests in STEM pathways and explained that early returns on the program were positive (at the time of the first interview, they had held their first session), as some of the girls from Malone asked when it was happening again and “they had a great time.”

Near Peers’ Perspectives

Toward the end of the program we interviewed the near peer mentors from The Career Academy, Alyanna and Alexis. They explained that while offering financial incentives were definitely nice to have and should be considered in other near-peer mentorship programs, what they valued most about their experiences as mentors was developing relationships with girls from The Malone Center. As Alexis explained, “It’s not all about the money, it’s more about finding those relationships with the kids and building those relationships.” Alyanna elaborated, “Kids want to see leadership, people that look kind of like them who have similar backgrounds so they know in the future ‘hey, I have a chance or I will be able to do things,’ so talking to kids and being able to connect with them [was important] to me. It was an easy yes for me [to be a peer mentor].” In explaining what they gained most from the program, Alyanna and Alexis talked about being able to “encourage kids,” facilitating “positive interactions,” acting as “a figure in their life they can look up to,” and creating special connections with the girls.

How The Career Academy (TCA) and The Malone Center Prepared for a Near-Peer Mentorship Model to Support Transitions to STEM Academic and Career Opportunities Through Mentorship

- Near-peer mentors ought to be financially incentivized (e.g., through a stipend, scholarship) for participating and helping to shape programming
- Program schedule should work for the near-peer mentors and be co-developed at project onset
- Mentorship work should be framed as a leadership opportunity to support academic and career-related goals beyond the programming experience
- Supportive adults should select near-peer mentors based on their ability to connect with mentees through shared experiences and/or relevant identity markers such as race, gender, or sexual orientation
- Supportive adults at organizations ought to express passion, enthusiasm, and commitment to seeing a peer-mentorship project through, taking the long-view
- Network-level supports are required to purposefully connect organizations and coordinate across settings
- Create STEM program activities with near-peer mentors that connect to local culture and in ways made relevant to students
About the Making Connections Project:
Fostering Connections and Pathways for Youth across STEM Learning Ecosystems

STEM Next and the Connected Learning Lab at UCI have partnered to support state and regional out of school networks as they develop and strengthen an ecological and connected approach to STEM learning. The case studies series represent real world examples that are part of a larger effort to develop and improve connection strategies that strengthen STEM learning ecosystems, centering the experiences, mobility, and futures of individual learners and their families across state and regional networks.

Each case study in this series takes a close look at a partner organization’s approach to one of the eight strategies for connecting: 1) A wraparound approach; 2) Coordinating between in school and out of school; 3) Giving back to one’s community; 4) Near peer or industry mentorship; 5) Translating youth interests in to STEM career opportunities; 6) Building relationships with families; 7) Curating online tools; or 8) Creating open portfolios. These case studies are not exhaustive; they are examples of coordinating and brokering that can be used to spark ideas and inspire growth.

For more information on the project and the strategies, visit https://stemnext.org/stem-pathways and connectedlearning.uci.edu/projects/making-connections/

References

