

PEER SUPPORT

BOOSTING RETENTION AND ACHIEVEMENT AT TESU

Tutoring, coaching, and community foster higher GPAs and degree completion.

Launched in November 2021, TESU's Peer Support Program provides academic peer coaching and tutoring to undergraduate students – including traditionally underrepresented and academically at-risk students – helping them navigate their degree programs and confidently tackle their coursework.

The program, funded by a \$483,000 Opportunity Meets Innovation Grant from OSHE and bolstered by an additional \$25,000 each from Citizens Bank and Investors Bank, provides academic support and fosters meaningful student-staff connections.

“The Peer Support Program promotes student success and increases retention and degree completion by employing part-time peer tutors and peer coaches who leverage their expertise and familiarity with the TESU academic model in supporting our adult learners,” said Steven Weinblatt, assistant director of Student Success Initiatives

in the Office of the Vice President and Provost. “Participating students receive one-on-one academic tutoring in English, writing and math, as well as peer coaching, via email or virtual appointments. The program aims to bolster students’ academic skills and decrease common stressors that can hinder degree completion.”

The program’s goals merge with TESU’s vision to “Build Careers, Advance Professions, Empower Lives” and align with New Jersey Gov. Phil Murphy’s goal of achieving 65% of working-age New Jerseyans possessing a post-high school credential by 2025. More than 700 students have participated, representing more than 280 appointments with the program’s staff. The endeavor has spurred an 8.9% increase in the retention rate for all undergraduate students, with historically underrepresented groups benefiting the most. Recent data indicates that the persistence rates of



Suzana Christopher, MSHRM student, B.A. '24, (right) and program tutors Sherri Downing Hamm, MSHRM '24, BSOL '22, (above) and Alex Shiroma, B.A. '22 (left)



Steven Weinblatt, assistant director of Student Success Initiatives in the Office of the Vice President and Provost at TESU

now enrolled in TESU's Master of Science in Human Resource Management (MSHRM) program. "As an adult learner unfamiliar with TESU's platforms, everything was new to me. I found digital learning platforms and written assignments challenging in the beginning. Alex helped me through the necessary revisions to my papers and remained committed to helping me improve my writing skills. Sherri was endlessly supportive, kind and always available – even during her off hours. Both introduced me to writing tools that helped me structure my papers while adhering to source citation guidelines, alleviating much of my stress. Sherri even walked me through tracking down an assignment I had uploaded but could no longer locate. I was so relieved that I wanted to hug her. I have three children and multiple responsibilities, but I still earned my B.A. degree at the University within 18 months while maintaining a 3.8 GPA. Both Alex and Sherri are now like family to me."

Both peer tutors have walked in Christopher's shoes. Shiroma earned his B.A. in History from TESU in 2022, and Hamm earned her MSHRM in 2024 and her Bachelor of Science in Organizational Leadership degree in 2022.

"Improving student retention, increasing GPAs and helping students like Suzana successfully navigate their online course space is our overarching goal," said



Jasmeial Jackson, Ed.D., vice provost and chief Student Success and Experience officer in the Office of the Vice President and Provost. "The Peer Support Program empowers and upskills our students, leading to higher degree completion rates. Program staff also provide evening and weekend support to accommodate our students' lifestyles while fostering a sense of community and human connection in online learning."

Christopher noted that TESU's peer support structure made her academic journey possible and urged fellow students to utilize the New Jersey State Library's platforms and resources, especially ProQuest, a searchable platform containing scholarly journal articles, eBooks, videos and dissertations.

The New Jersey State Library is an affiliate of TESU. Visit njstatelib.org to learn more. For additional information about the Peer Support Program and how it might benefit your degree journey, email the Peer Support Team at peersupport@tesu.edu

underrepresented students who used the program's services were significantly higher than those who did not – with a 16% higher retention rate for Black students and an 11% higher retention rate for Hispanic students.

Master's program student Suzana Christopher, B.A. '24, expressed her gratitude for the assistance she received from the Peer Support team, especially while completing her B.A. in Liberal Studies degree in Human Resource Management in 2024. Since English is her second language, she initially found the writing-intensive program overwhelming. Nevertheless, she said that program tutors Sherri Downing Hamm and Alex Shiroma supported her every step of the way, often going above and beyond to assist her with written assignments and even helping retrieve submitted work she thought was lost in her course space.

"The Peer Support Program was a cornerstone of my undergraduate journey. Sherri and Alex helped me with technical issues, navigating the student portal and familiarizing me with online resources," noted Christopher, who is

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SUZANA CHRISTOPHER, MSHRM STUDENT, B.A. '24