



CASE STUDY

National Louis University

Chicago, Ill.



Growth Mindset for College Students

Three years ago, National Louis University launched its Pathways program to help more Chicago-area high school graduates earn college degrees. In addition to providing supports such as financial assistance, academic advising and peer mentoring, NLU works hard to help its students develop a growth mindset about their ability to persist and succeed in college.

Changing Mindsets to Change Outcomes

NLU has a reputation for meeting the needs of non-traditional college students, particularly older students and people already holding down a job. In recent years they have emphasized a different group of non-traditional students: low-income students, students of color and first-generation college goers just out of high school.

"Tens of thousands of students graduate from Chicago high schools and do not persist in college," said Stephanie Poczos, Associate Dean, General Education and Pathways at NLU. "We wanted to change that."

The Pathways program provides a wealth of wraparound services to increase the odds that incoming freshmen will stick around to finish their degrees. NLU provides generous financial assistance, job-friendly class schedules, mentors and comprehensive advising.

NLU also works to help its students cultivate the beliefs, confidence, and sense of belonging that are critical to their success.

"Many of our students have this idea that they can't be successful in school," said Poczos. "They haven't seen a model from parents or caregivers of finding success at the higher ed level."

Motivation and Confidence are Key

While researching other colleges that have had success improving retention and graduation rates among disadvantaged students, Poczos and her colleagues determined that increasing students' motivation and confidence in the unfamiliar world of college are key.

"We thought, what can we do to change that academic mindset, so students believe in their own abilities?" said Poczos.

As part of that effort, NLU this fall provided the 30-minute, online Growth Mindset for College Students program to all 600 incoming Pathways students. NLU initially trialed the program with 300 students in 2017-18. Developed by the Project for Education Research that Scales (PERTS) at Stanford University, Growth Mindset for College Students is a free, evidence-based program designed to increase students' engagement, motivation, and ultimately success by laying the foundation for a growth mindset.

"Growth mindset is really core to our model," said Aarti Dhupelia, vice president for undergraduate education and dean of the undergraduate college at NLU. "The PERTS program felt really aligned with our goals around student success."



NATIONAL
LOUIS
UNIVERSITY



Pathways Program

Launched 2015-16 with:
85 students

Current Pathways
student body:

1,180

Profile of Pathways Students:

600
First-time freshmen 2018-19

90%
Low-income

94%
Under-represented minority

82%
First-generation college goer

2.7
Average High School GPA

18
Average age

Setting the Tone

PERTS' executive director, Dave Paunesku, studied mindset science under Carol Dweck at Stanford University and continues to conduct pioneering research in the field. PERTS' mission is to take what research has already revealed about the best ways to help students' cultivate a growth mindset and sense of belonging, and create simple, affordable tools that schools can leverage to help tens of thousands of students.

PERTS research and partnerships are specifically targeted at helping students from marginalized communities succeed, making the organization a natural partner for NLU's Pathways program.

Nationally, nearly 200 colleges and universities in 44 states this year are offering PERTS' growth mindset and social belonging programs to more than 100,000 higher ed students.

At National Louis University, students take the Growth Mindset for College Students program at the start of the school year as part of its Student Success Seminar, which is a required, for-credit course for all incoming freshmen.

"We send the message from day one that if you have a growth mindset you can persevere and you can do well," said Dhupelia. "We were trying to figure out how to engage students more intentionally (on the concept). The PERTS program is a nice concrete strategy to do it."

A 'Plug-and-Play' Solution

In addition to advancing NLU's efforts to bolster students' beliefs and motivations, Poczos said the Growth Mindset for College Students program has been embraced by the school because it has been easy to implement and has not disrupted classes or teachers' goals.

"It's not a big lift for the universities or for the faculty," said Poczos. "It's literally a class period or a portion of a class period."

While it's too early to gauge the long-term impact of the Growth Mindset program at NLU, Poczos said the school saw "very positive results" among the first group of 456 students who participated, as 32 percent reported a stronger growth mindset about learning after completing the PERTS program.

Aarti Dhupelia acknowledged that it may always be challenging to identify the exact impact of the PERTS program on NLU students, given all the different things the school is doing to help students stay in school and graduate. But she is persuaded it is a worthwhile addition.

"Higher education nationwide is stepping up its efforts to support student success, and this is a plug-and-play solution that works well," she said. "It's a great addition."

PERTS creates evidence-based programs for educators in K-12 and higher education settings.

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