College Opportunity and Access (COA^2) Program

Location → https://www.coa.edu/college-opportunity-and-access/index.php

1.   What is COA^2 and its aim?

The College Opportunity And Access (COA^2) program aims to build a supportive, educational, and communal advocacy space designed for students who self-identify with the experiences of minoritized, first-generation, and/or low-income college students. This program was launched in response to the findings of the research carried out by the Student Persistence Working Group (SPWG) in 2018-2019.

2.   For whom is the COA^2 program?

COA invites students who self-identify with the experiences of minoritized, first-generation, and/or low-income college students to participate in the program. Students who accept an invitation are then invited to various events and receive additional opportunities. One does not need to demonstrate academic need to participate in the program. Current participants bring a wide range of interests, accomplishments, experiences, and skills to COA.

3.   Why aren't all first-year students invited?

The limited enrollment is purely a function of limited financial and human resources. For example, there is a limited number of Peer Mentors, and each Peer Mentor currently connects with three or fewer peers. Furthermore, we can only accommodate a limited number of students for the early orientation program prior to the start of the academic year.

4.   What is "difference education"?

Difference education recognizes the importance of acknowledging the different ways in which education, ethnicity, race, and social class background affect a student's transition to and experiences in college[1]. As recently retired COA philosophy professor John Visvader would say, "Context matters." COA^2 provides a space for that difference to be acknowledged, explored, and understood both by the institution and the participants of the program. We hope to foster an environment that assumes less and listens more.

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[1] Source = https://www.vox.com/2017/9/11/16270316/college-mobility-culture

5.   What's the problem with focusing on student deficits?

Focusing on student deficits perpetuates an implicit association not based on evidence that students who come from certain educational, socioeconomic, ethnic, or racial backgrounds are at risk of not persisting in college due to inherent deficits in the individual or the group with which they identify. In contrast, COA^2 recognizes that each participant brings considerable assets that prepare them to succeed at COA. The program welcomes and guides the student in bringing those strengths to the COA community in service of their education and to use what they learn to benefit others and the communities in which they live, learn, and work.

6.   What does participation in this program include?

COA^2 plans a number of advocacy and skill development workshops as well as cohort-building activities, including an early move-in and orientation prior to the start of the academic year. COA^2 also matches interested participants with Peer Mentors on a first-come, first-served basis. Participants also play a major role in shaping the program and its activities.

7.   What do Peer Mentors do?

Peer Mentors are student leaders at the college who serve as bridges between participants' home communities and the COA and Bar Harbor communities. In creating this bridge, the Peer Mentor both aims to identify the experiences, interests, and unique strengths of the participants and to introduce their Peers to relevant networks and experiences familiar to the Peer Mentor, on- and off-campus.

8.   Is it "working"? How do we know?

Direct feedback from participants about their experiences plays a large part in assessing the success of the program. Participants provide feedback on all COA^2 workshops and at mid-year and end-of-year. They will also provide feedback for peer mentors in an online form at the end of the first term and first year. Finally, COA collects persistence and graduation rates after the first term, first year, and fourth, fifth, and sixth years.