

Adventure coaching takes student support outdoors

From art to garden visits, ASU Student Success Center trying new ways of connecting Sun Devils

By Mary Beth Faller, ASU News

February 21, 2025

On a recent sunny morning, a circle of Arizona State University students is flinging colorful balls and toys to each other on a lawn. Each student had to focus on all the items flying through the air at them.

It was a perfect metaphor for juggling the demands of college life with work, student organizations, roommates and classes.

The session was led by [Steve Sassaman](#), an assistant clinical professor in the School of Community Resources and Development and an expert in [outdoor education](#).

“Sometimes things come out of nowhere,” he told the group.

“You’re juggling a lot, and sometimes we need to ask for clarification.”

The students were participating in a new kind of peer coaching through the [Student Success Center](#) at ASU. Adventure coaching, which debuted this year, infuses an outdoor group activity with the supportive interactions that are typically shared during one-on-one peer coaching sessions, such as how to connect with other students and how to deal with stress.

The students who tossed the balls on a recent sunny morning also participated in a team-building activity that highlighted collaboration and a card-matching game that fostered conversations.

The new adventure coaching, and the addition of art coaching this year, are reaching students in ways that they prefer, according to [Ina Seok](#), director of the Student Success Center. She led the center through a redesign two years ago.

Seok said that the center started to see a decrease in the number of one-on-one peer-coaching appointments — a trend reported at universities nationwide.

“And simultaneously, we also started to hear about the [epidemic of loneliness](#),” she said.

“So we really centered our redesign around social connection. One of the best parts of peer-to-peer support is this idea of creating a social space for students to feel less lonely and to feel that they belong at ASU and to feel that they matter.

“We did empathy mapping of the students to really put ourselves in their shoes. We interviewed ASU students to hear, ‘What do you want from us? What would you imagine peer coaching to be?’”

(Video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wzeb2c_3nPc)

One of the main takeaways was to add new ways of coaching besides the one-on-one appointment model, which is still available.

“We were hearing from students that that's not necessarily how they want to meet with the peer coach. They don't want to sit down at a table and talk for 30 minutes. It's really daunting for them,” Seok said.

[Katie Collins](#), a program manager in the Student Success Center, had the idea for an outdoors-based coaching method and acquired a mini grant from University College to set up the pilot this year.

“I wanted to find a way to help break down that barrier in the conversations. And I was always an outdoorsy person wanting to just explore and be out there,” she said.

This year, adventure coaching is offered as occasional events, and art coaching happens every week. One-on-one coaching sessions are still available. The Student Success Center is open to any campus-immersion student at ASU. (ASU Online students have access to a personal success coach, as well as [360 Life Services](#), a comprehensive support program.)

Last fall, the Student Success Center held an adventure coaching session in which the students traveled to the Garden Commons at the Polytechnic campus. They learned how to use the ASU shuttle system and how nutrition can affect their well-being — all while participating in coaching.

“I've learned that students are looking for that one-off experience that they can do,” Collins said. “They're looking for ways to connect with each other because sometimes you don't want to talk to the person who's sitting next to you in class. Moments like this is where that can happen organically.”

Seok said the redesign also changed the way the peer coaches interact with students.

“In the past, it was very rigid. You asked this set of questions and this set of questions and you lead them to here,” she said.

“One of the challenges that we observed through the redesign process is that students want to feel like somebody is there to see them and hear them.”

Now the coaches are listening first, then asking exploratory questions.

“It’s, ‘What’s on your mind? What have been the options or solutions that you’ve already tried?’

“We encourage students to know that they sometimes have the answers within them.”

Building rapport

While the adventure coaching was going on, Sara McCartan, a third-year art education and biology major, was in a classroom leading a session of art coaching. The students were collaborating on drawings, although producing a perfect piece of art is not the purpose.

“Mostly it’s a focus on mindfulness or wellness,” McCartan said.

“People come to this, and it’s kind of under the guise of just a fun craft. And then I can build up that rapport and we can start talking about their aspirations or what’s troubling them, because, you know, college is lonely,” she said.

McCartan tries to connect with the students individually after the art sessions for more coaching support.

Over this past year, the sessions have involved sketch booklets, journaling and watercolors. No art experience or expertise is needed.

“If I meet students who have that kind of perspective, I’m like, ‘Give yourself acceptance,’” she said.

“What we’re doing is opening them up to the vulnerability that is art. And that leads to other vulnerabilities, which is what we really try to focus on in the center,” she said.

Finding relief

Sassaman said that participating in outdoor group activities can spark hidden strengths, and he saw that happen in the adventure coaching session.

“Some individuals that seemed a little shy in the beginning really connected with this last activity, and they got involved in that leadership role and maybe they haven't had opportunities to be in that leadership position previously,” he said.

Ailani Rodriguez, a third-year art studies major, attended the adventure coaching session after hearing about it from her student worker supervisor in Educational Outreach and Student Services.

“I came with a friend because we wanted to see what it would be about,” she said.

“The activities were engaging and fun, and you can take a lesson out of it that you can apply to everyday life.”

Zyon Sanchez-Perez, a third-year student majoring in finance and data analytics, is a peer coach who does both one-on-one sessions and adventure coaching.

“I hope to be a financial advisor someday,” he said. “I want to be part of people's success and give back to my own community. I grew up first-generation American and first-generation college student.”

He said it's gratifying to see the relief on students' faces after a coaching session.

“They come in, they're stressed, they have so many questions. They're like, ‘I'm worried about this. I don't know what to do.’

“And I say, ‘OK. We'll take it one question at a time. We'll get through this. Can you breathe now?’

“And they're like, ‘Yes!’”

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

Main image



Ailani Rodriguez (center), a third-year art studies student, participates in a card-matching game with Megan Moriarty, a third-year supply chain student, and peer coach Zyon Sanchez-Perez, a third-year finance and data analytics student, during an adventure coaching session held Feb. 7 by the ASU Student Success Center on the Tempe campus. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News

Gallery



Steve Sassaman (wearing a hat), an assistant clinical professor in the School of Community Resources and Development, talks with students about their team-building project during an adventure coaching session held outdoors on the Tempe campus on Feb. 7.



Success coach Zyon Sanchez-Perez, a third-year finance and data analytics student, participates in an adventure coaching team-building activity.



Among the new ways that the ASU Student Success Center is supporting students is art coaching, offered weekly. At a recent session, fourth-year students (from left) Karoline Bustamante, Sophia Peralta, Mariah Martinez and Paola Diaz drew things that make them happy.