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reTHINKING Access to Student Support with the MAPS Widget

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reTHINK #113:

*Mentors Advocating and Promoting Success (MAPS):
Mapping an Online Presence for UNST Mentors Supporting Retention*

reTHINKING Access to Student Support with the MAPS Widget

by Neera Malhotra, Erika Schnatz, and Dana Lundell
University Studies Peer Mentor Program
June 30, 2015

Project Themes

Sustainability
Affirmation
Health
Accessibility
Safety
Validation
Content Navigation
Well-Being
Credibility
Academic Enculturation
Inclusion

Abstract: The Provost's Challenge project #113, reTHINKING Access to Student Support with the MAPS Widget, explored the online presence of University Studies (UNST) peer-mentor support team called *Mentors Advocating and Promoting Success (MAPS)*. The grant money was used to create an online widget as a tool to access MAPS team by fellow mentors and students (SINQ + FRINQ) when in need. The project demonstrates that the widget tool not only facilitates instant access of the team's support and resources, but it also is seen as a tool to document concerns that affect student retention within the University.

Disclaimer: To maintain the gender neutrality, pronouns like "they, them, their" are used instead of any specific gender pronoun based on binary system of addressing genders.

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Purpose: To delineate project findings that explore the impact and nature of the online presence of the Mentors Advocating and Promoting Success (MAPS) team within the University Studies (UNST) program. This report analyzes data specifically related to the use of the online Ask-a-MAPS Mentor widget created as part of the Provost's Challenge project #113.

Overview of Results: The analysis of data downloaded from the widget in AY 2014–15, along with in-person formal interviews of MAPS team members, revealed that the online widget has increased access for UNST students to navigate through campus resources and human support at PSU. The project facilitated ubiquitous access to support for users through the Ask-a-MAPS Mentor online widget. These are the overall results of this project:

1. The data revealed several themes illustrating concrete key student concerns and support needs they have at PSU.
2. The data shows that the widget not only supports instant access to resources via the MAPS mentor team, but it also helps in documenting the needs of the users, which in turn facilitates the sustainability of the project.
3. Even though the “Ask-a-MAPS Mentor” tool was originally conceived as a way to initiate online exchanges between the MAPS team and the tool's users, in practice the widget has also been used in combination with in-formal meetings and telephone conversations to streamline access to campus resources.
4. The widget had an impact on the way MAPS team members viewed their work with the addition of the tool, calling it a “go-to button” for the team.
5. The interview conversations also revealed that most users, which are UNST students, prefer to reach out for help in person instead of using the widget, and they added that it depends upon the urgency of the situation and also the kind of situation one is facing.
6. As a whole the use of the widget facilitates MAPS work to ensure holistic access to the campus resources and promote credible work by mentors by sustaining an online presence to facilitate academic enculturation and self-validation.

Findings: Table 1 presents the summary of data collection through the online widget, a button students press in their UNST online course shells that generates a web form inviting them to outline their concerns (via a checklist or in an open-ended comment box) that the MAPS team might help them address. It shows that most queries during AY 2014–15 focused on academic concerns. These concerns were further expressed as needs related to writing resources, research help, and access to content material. The second most common concern all three terms was the category of “health and safety.” This was defined as concerns related to physical health, sexual assault, and mental health. The third most common concern during the academic year was interactions with faculty, staff, and others. This concern included communication and interactions with students and faculty, as well as interactions with the departments to access resources to facilitate holistic support for the students. Finally, another concern noted was “finance,” which included needs related to financial aid and understanding of campus resources to help pay education-related expenses. Table 1 shows the overall flow of these themes and the levels of concern here.

	Fall 2014	Winter 2015	Spring 2015
Total Number of Users (=27)	14 SINQ: 7 FRINQ: 6 Unknown: 1	8 SINQ: 5 FRINQ: 3 Unknown: 0	5 SINQ: 2 FRINQ: 3 Unknown: 0
Primary Concern I	Academics	Academics	Academics
Primary Concern II	Health & Safety	Interaction with Faculty, Staff & Others	Health & Safety
Primary Concern III	Finance	Health & Safety	Interaction with Faculty, Staff & Others

Table 1: Summary of Data Collection (Note that 6 data entries were submitted manually by the MAPS team during the Fall 2014 term).

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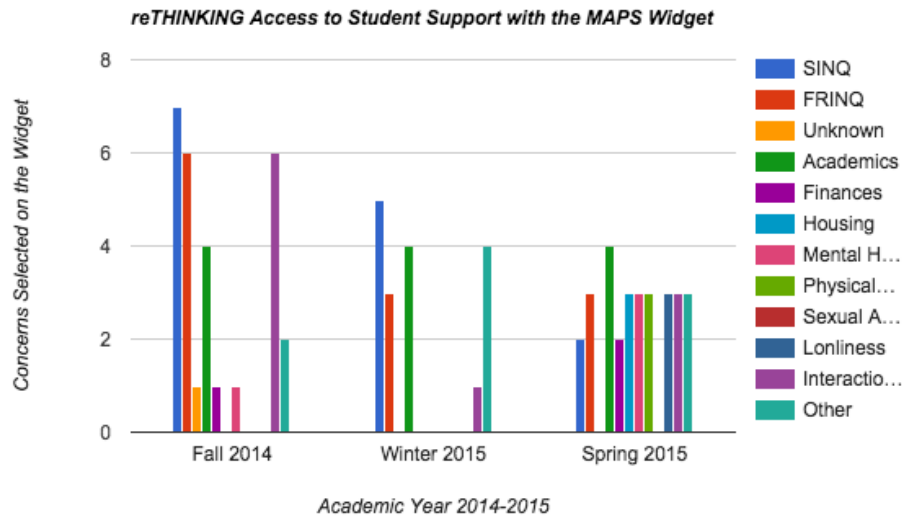


Chart 1: Summary of Key Findings - Fall 2014–Spring 2015

Chart 1 also shows the summary of the key finding in the AY 2014–15. It presents the key concerns that users had each term (Fall–Spring). The chart provides a graphical picture of the use of online widget. For each widget form that is submitted, students are allowed to select more than one concern (or theme/sub-theme in our final coding), resulting in multiple points of contact and resource referrals each time a form is submitted. Thus, Chart 1 shows the wider array of theme types and number of concerns that are addressed by the MAPS team via the widget each term. Each entry by a user via the widget can generate more than one response type from the MAPS team members due to the complexity of the themes and differing resource angles and approaches required to bring resolution to a student’s situation. For example, one SINQ user will use the widget initially to submit one form, but multiple themes may be identified as a “need” in a comment box or check list there, such as financial issues, safety, and loneliness, which requires a number of outreach and inreach strategies. Thus, these concern types may represent both more “common” (frequently used and reported) or “emerging” (self-generated by the student) themes or both.

Method: This project used thematic, qualitative analysis that identified categories of student concern as entered by students and mentors directly into the newly introduced MAPS widget beginning fall 2014. Mentors and students were encouraged to use the online widget to reach the MAPS team. This online tool was open to all the FRINQ and SINQ students as well as to the mentors and could be accessed in their course shells (D2L) and on the mentor program website. In addition to the online widget, personal communication, email, phone calls, and texts were also used as a medium to reach the team. Data was downloaded from the Ask-a-MAPS online widget (in .csv format) and converted into a Microsoft Excel format as well as Word text format. In addition to using the Excel document to organize the data, the Excel data file was used to explore the demographics of the users. The Word text format was used as the project file for qualitative data analysis software (Atlas.ti) for coding and exploring various themes. Apart from accessing the online data via the widget, formal interviews with mentors and MAPS mentors were conducted using a standard set of questions for each interview. They were asked to share their experience and feelings about the process of interacting with the online widget and the MAPS team as a whole.

Data Analysis: Since the responses provided by the users were in narrative form, a qualitative data analysis process was used. Chart 2 explains the data mining process. The following steps were used:

1. **Data Immersion:** The first step in qualitative data analysis is immersion in the data as a whole. This was done by listening to the interviews and by extensive reading and rereading of the downloaded narratives from the widget.
2. **Data Coding:** After that, the meaning of each sentence was considered in light of the complete downloaded

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data, and statements that appear particularly revealing were noted or marked through the individual interviews. The researchers generated a list of themes and sub-themes, and they agreed upon the list and their definitions. Then the researchers checked with the MAPS team members for validity and clarity to ensure the list of themes (turned into codes) would be useful and relatable to future coders of future data generated from the widget. These statements and the interview narrative were then coded directly in the documents to explore the content as a whole.

- Data Themes:** Based on coding, the key themes were identified on the basis of the purpose of using the widget (i.e., the category of student concern as shown in Table 1 as listed in the widget) as well as the conceptual (researcher-generated) themes that emerged as relevant based on the context and outcomes of the student's experience of using the widget itself. After a concern was identified by the student (such as Table 1 themes show), data was further categorized according to the key sub-themes, agreed-upon by the researchers, such as 1) Accessibility, 2) Credibility, 3) Validation, 4) Sustainability, and 5) Academic Enculturation. Codes were also drawn from the list of categories from which students could select directly on the widget form. For example, the data downloaded from the widget from the category, "Academics," the data was coded to see if the academic need was related to *Accessibility*, *Credibility*, *Validation*, *Sustainability*, and *Academic Enculturation*. To exemplify further, one of the users reached out to the MAPS team via the widget to check about available resources for an international student who was struggling in class. This need reflects that the user needed resources, to provide access to the mentee, that is *culturally appropriate*, and get *validation* for the student's as well as the user's own needs to reach out to the MAPS team. In the previous example, the user needed immediate assistance to ensure that the student was receiving full support in alignment with their culture. The user also wanted to get validation on the steps taken by them to assist the student in keeping up with the class requirements. The outcome of the query was that the user received resources when it was needed, affirmation for their experience, and a sense of validation as a result of contacting MAPS via the widget. As part of the data analysis process, every statement and narratives from the three individual interviews were explored individually while maintaining the richness of the data in totality, which included the primary researcher's reading of the text and viewing of the interview videos two or three times each to deepen understanding and find comparisons across the data. Also, apart from looking at the individual user's statements, inter-user commonalities were also given consideration to suggest that a theme was either shared or emphasized by these interviewees.

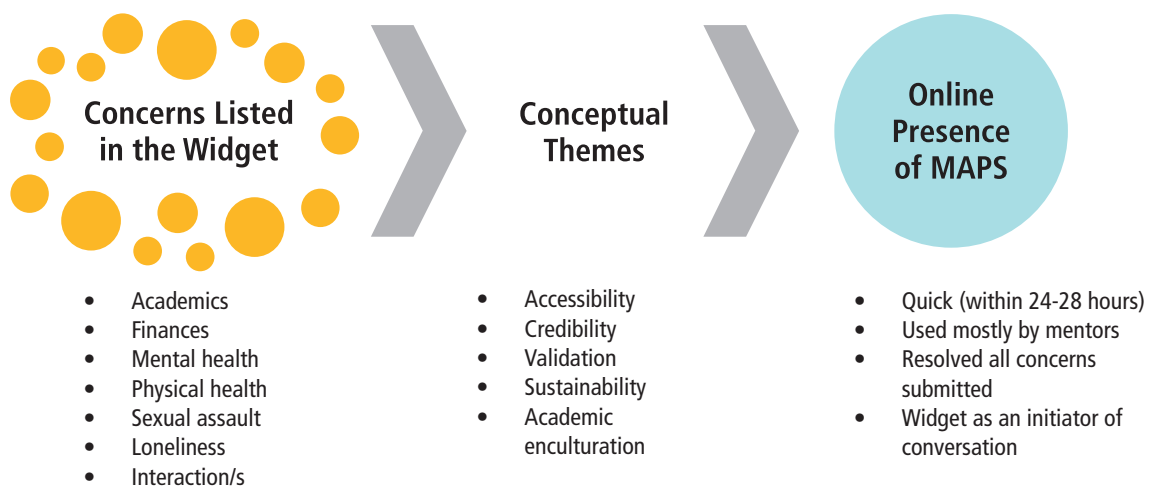


Chart 2: Data Mining Process

Inter-user Analysis: After thoroughly reviewing the data, the commonalities between the users, described here and in Chart 2 as the “conceptual themes,” were 1) Accessibility, 2) Credibility, 3) Validation, 4) Sustainability, 5) Validation, and 6) Academic Enculturation. These are concepts that appeared to be conceptually similar and which were then identified as themes that constituted the “essence” of the experience itself for the user. This content analysis took the overt themes (Table 1 categories) and deepened them by examining the process (Chart 2’s conceptual themes) enacted to connect the student to

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a resource, as well as showing the kind of outcome that was achieved as a result of the connection with the MAPS team. As mentioned above, the key themes or common “essence” were created. These unique themes provided the enriched variation and wide range of experiences the different users had, all of whom had initially used the same widget to reach the MAPS team.

Inter-relationships between the Themes: In the end, data analysis was done to understand the interrelationship between the primary themes, conceptual themes, and verbatim descriptions written by the students using their words submitted in the widget’s Web forms or by the MAPS team members in their formal interviews.. This was done by comparing the data gathered from the widget and through the individual interviews. For example, one user reached out to the MAPS mentors via the widget to get support on the online mentoring related resources. During the individual interviews, the participants were asked if they had any feedback related to the use of the widget for those who mentor online. One mentor stated that *“The widget is really useful and important. When I think of online mentoring and online classes in general it’s useful, [because] a lot of students are not on campus. It functions as a location in the space of an online classroom. That widget reaches out so widely.”* To add another example, data from the widget indicated that users seek a simple affirmation from the MAPS team regarding the resources they provided to their mentee anonymously (although it is technically not possible to have a completely anonymous query). When a MAPS mentor was asked about their feelings around the usability of the widget, they said, *“If we were just communicating...like just via email I think anonymity might be difficult...it gives a categorization help to look into what kind of query it is...I read the response for the widget and then read that what would be more helpful. A lot of time sitting with the person, can help calm the person. I found that usually people are very receptive and sometimes what I do is I compile and offer the opportunity to follow up in person. I think the act of following up is very crucial to community building.”* This quote reflects that even though the MAPS team reaches the users via emails to answer their specific questions, they often go out of their way to ensure that the information provided to the user is accessible, valid, resourceful, and culturally appropriate by ensuring that they are available to meet in person as well.

Limitations: Throughout the course of this project, several limitations were encountered that impacted the number of inquiries submitted by students during the pilot year. There were three primary areas that influenced the outcomes and sample size of this data set and report, including administrative restructuring in UNST, limited placement opportunities for the widget in online course shells, and the ongoing uses(s) of multiple means for contacting MAPS that remains key to its model.

Administrative Restructure: UNST lost its in-house primary instructional design and technical support officer with no replacement for that position put into place after his departure. Therefore, the team did not have a resource to work on adding the D2L widget to more course shells in Fall 2014. This posed a significant delay as we had to form new relationships at PSU to discern where and whether this project’s goals could be supported from both the design and technological standpoint.

Absence of the Widget within all UNST D2L Course Shells: D2L does not support the necessary functionality needed in order to automatically add a widget to all new and existing UNST course shells as desired by the project team at the start of the project. Therefore, a workaround solution was to create an “instructional” guide for adding the widget manually to the course shells. With UNST faculty having to do this voluntarily instead of having it become an automatic component of the D2L shell, this contributed to a decrease in the number of faculty who chose to add it or who knew about the widget as new faculty. Another workaround was that these instructions would be added to the UNST faculty resources page. However, those are only visited voluntarily by faculty who may or may not visit the MAPS page. This was a very different outcome than what we originally had intended for the project and reduced the numbers of courses that hosted the widget, as well as reduced the number of students who could access the MAPS team via their course shell.

Traditional MAPS Model versus Online Widget: The MAPS team created a banner and button for the widget on the homepage of the UNST Mentor website. Peer mentors were encouraged and trained to use the button as a primary means to contact the team and even learned how to encourage their mentees to use the widget. However, since in the past there were

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multiple traditional avenues to contact the MAPS team, including phone, email, and in-person preferences, this naturally limited the number of users who would first click on the button itself. The widget was intended to be an “additional” means but not the sole means for contacting MAPS.

These limitations will continue to be addressed in future years as the project is sustained, and it is anticipated there will be a steady increase over time in the use of the button, the addition of it to future course shells by faculty, and ongoing training and awareness of the tool for mentors and students via other means of publicizing its use.

Sustainability, Reflection, and Actions: One goal of the reTHINK Project was to identify a means for sustaining the new work that the introduction of the online widget brought to the UNST mentor program. The MAPS team previously gathered responses in these ways: 1) email to a listserv hosted by the team, 2) email directly to one or more of the MAPS members, 3) a phone call to a team member, or 4) a conversation or meeting in person. The implementation, introduction, and piloting of the MAPS widget in AY 2014–15 shifted the team’s work by offering and encouraging another way to contact team members both for students and mentors. With this new pathway for access, it offered the MAPS team and reTHINK Project team researchers a way to consider how the work might change in the future based on the data in this report.

To sustain the project, the MAPS team needed to redefine and revisit the roles of the MAPS team and to find a way to include the reTHINK online work within the core team structure. This diagram (Figure 1) shows how the whole team is structured now after the reTHINK work has shifted into the team’s structure.

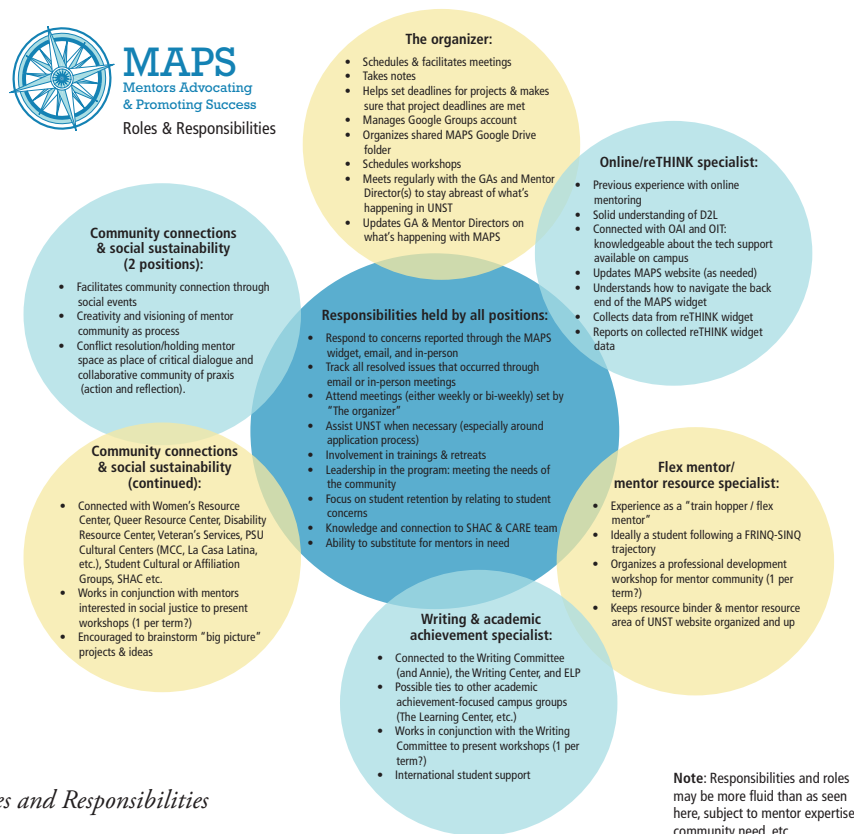


Figure 1: MAPS Roles and Responsibilities

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To continue the specific outcomes of the reTHINK project for future years beginning in AY 2015–16, the team further defined the unique relationship and roles of the Online and reTHINK Specialist shown in Figure 2. This projected, as anticipated, shifted the work naturally to one of the team members who will continue to monitor and track the use of the widget and generate annual reports.



Figure 2: Online and reTHINK Specialist Responsibilities

Reflection and Actions: The project tracked formally that 27 people used the widget directly during the widget’s pilot year (note that 6 inquiries were submitted as a test by MAPS mentors). The goal for future years is to increase the direct use of the widget to track and document all contact by mentors and students with the MAPS team. In addition to the widget use and based on past means for accessing the MAPS team, which were still encouraged in the pilot year of the tool (in case the tool would not work or be inaccessible for some reason), many people also accessed the MAPS team via email, in-person communication, and other informal ways to meet such as informal coffee meet-ups and informal chats. During the interviews with the MAPS team members or mentors who used the widget, every participant was asked to provide guidelines to ensure sustainability of the widget. Following are the quotes pulled out from the interview conversations:

- “...having the widget there in your course shell gives students the option to go directly to give sources and with anonymity...”
- “Even though we can post a link etc., just having the widget is very streamlined. The reason why it’s useful is it’s ‘presence.’ It symbolizes the location, a defined space where issues can be recorded. It’s sort of preventive, so that when the students know that it’s there, the moment something comes up, they know that it’s there. It takes a lot for a student to come to even the mentor, they still wait for a long time to come forward with the issues, it ‘normalizes’ the issues that they might need assistance. I don’t know any student who has gone through college who didn’t need any such support. I think that’s true for all types of students.”

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- *“I think it counts to have that presence and carrying it forward. I think, if we can have a direct tab that connects to our emails, it would be more convenient, instead of just getting an intimation that someone filled the webform.”*
- *“...it’s perfect the way it is..”*
- *“...it’s a go-to button,” another mentor adds, “I know if I reach them via [the] widget, I will get multiple answers, as everyone is awesome. This gives me multiple perspectives on my situation. Also, I know that at the end of that email dialogue, I can always meet them in person or may be talk to them over the phone.”*
- *“...with this team behind me, this team [she stressed], I can handle any situation; the widget added that access for me to reach MAPS team whenever I needed them.”*

Based on the feedback of the mentors and the themes and sub-themes gathered from the widget’s webforms, future reflection will be ongoing in the form of data reports and year-end interviews with mentors and MAPS team members.

Conclusion: Finally, the work of reTHINK will continue utilizing the widget and with instructions and training of the incoming AY 2015–16 MAPS mentors to use the widget and generate data and reports. The development of the reTHINK widget provides a centralized and highly trackable means for mentors and students who access the high-impact resources of the PSU campus.