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Intentional Interactions as A Framework for Resident Mentorship in Student Affair

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Abstract

The article examines a paradox of university life: against the backdrop of formal improvements in aggregated mental health metrics, high risks of social isolation and vulnerability of students' mental well-being persist. The limits of traditional, event-based support practices in student residences are critically assessed, and the need to shift the focus toward proactive, targeted formats of student support is argued. The aim of the study is a theoretical and applied analysis of the Targeted Interactions model as a structured framework for mentoring work with residents. Methodologically, the study is based on a systematized review of the relevant literature and a qualitative case study analysis grounded in the program at Nova Southeastern University. The findings demonstrate that regular individual conversations between mentors and students outperform event-based approaches: they ensure early identification of distress, strengthen the sense of belonging, and have a positive effect on retention indicators. The article concludes that the model of targeted interactions is an effective, scalable, and economically rational tool for shaping a supportive campus environment. The material is addressed to student affairs administrators, residence life staff, and higher education researchers.

Keywords: targeted interactions, resident mentoring, student services, student retention, first-year student experience, student mental health, sense of belonging, proactive support, student support model, residence life.

Introduction

Contemporary higher education faces a paradox in the field of student well-being. On the one hand, updated bodies of empirical data indicate a steady decline in clinically significant manifestations of mental disorders. According to the large-scale Healthy Minds Study, in 2022–2025 the proportion of students with symptoms of severe depression decreased from 23% to 18%, and the prevalence of suicidal ideation from 15% to 11% [1]. This trend largely correlates with systemic institutional interventions: expanded access to mental health services, active implementation of telemedicine and mindfulness programs, as well as an increase in the number of counseling and psychological service professionals on campuses [2].

On the other hand, despite improvements in clinical indicators, social integration and experiences of loneliness remain at critically high levels. In 2025, 52% of students report a pronounced sense of loneliness, which is only a moderate decrease compared to 58% in 2022 [1]. Convergent results are demonstrated by a study conducted at The Ohio State University: in 2025, 43.2% of students are classified as lonely [3]. The gap between positive clinical dynamics and stagnation in social well-being indicates the selective nature of existing measures: they are effective as remedial instruments, but do not restore the social fabric of the university community, which has been eroded by the COVID-19 pandemic and the large-scale digitalization of the educational process

[4]. Consequently, the key target of intervention is not narrowly understood mental health, but a more fundamental connectivity crisis and a deficit of mechanisms of social integration.

This crisis is manifested most acutely in the context of student residences, which are the traditional nuclei of campus social life. The dominant practices of student affairs units remain oriented toward large-scale events and administrative and disciplinary functions, which calls into question their capacity for targeted engagement. According to the 2023 NASPA report, 61% of students declare interest in campus activities, yet fewer than 25% remain regular participants [4]. Mass formats are poorly suited to identifying individual needs, especially in high-risk groups such as first-year students, international students, and first-generation students who, according to available data, experience isolation 30% more often [4].

At the same time, the academic literature provides compelling evidence that mentoring improves academic performance, engagement, and retention [5, 6]. However, there is an evident research problem regarding specific, structured, and scalable models of proactive mentoring that are organically embedded in the everyday life of residences and implemented by student staff.

The aim of the study is an analytical reassessment of the targeted interactions model as a structural framework for residential mentoring, with an evaluation of its theoretical validity and practical potential for reducing social isolation and improving retention indicators.

The scientific novelty lies in the conceptualization of targeted interactions as a proactive support tool that institutionalizes and scales personalized mentoring within the boundaries of the existing infrastructure of student residences.

The author's hypothesis states that the implementation of the targeted interactions model, based on regular individual conversations between resident mentors and students, ensures earlier identification of academic and socio-emotional difficulties, strengthens the sense of belonging to the university community, and, consequently, increases retention indicators compared to traditional event-based forms of support.

Materials and Methods

The present study is based on the integration of two complementary methodological strategies: a systematic literature review and a qualitative case analysis. This combination simultaneously provides a broad theoretical and empirical panorama and makes it possible to conduct an in-depth examination of the practices of implementing an innovative student support model in a real institutional context.

The systematic literature review focused on a corpus of peer-reviewed articles, monographs, and authoritative sectoral reports published in 2020–2025. Search procedures were carried out in the Scopus and Web of Science databases. The objectives of the review included documenting current trends in the field of student well-being and support infrastructure, assessing the effectiveness of existing mentoring programs, as well as identifying key organizational and cultural barriers to their implementation in the university environment.

The qualitative case analysis focuses on the Intentional Interaction model, developed and implemented at Nova Southeastern University. The selection of this case is due to its completeness and clear architecture, which directly addresses the problem areas outlined in the introduction. Within the framework of the analysis, the structure of the model, its basic mechanisms, target groups, applied tools, and reported outcomes were examined sequentially. This examination made it possible to meaningfully relate the theoretical propositions identified in the review to practical data obtained from a specific institutional case.

Results and Discussion

Traditional mechanisms for supporting students, which have shaped higher education practice for many years, are predominantly reactive in nature. They are usually triggered only post factum, when clear signs of distress have already appeared: low grades, placement on academic probation, or a student independently seeking help from a counselling center. An approach aimed at putting out fires does not cope well with prevention and is often delayed. In addition, such systems are frequently fragmented and do not reflect the multidimensionality of student difficulties, systematically overlooking extra-academic barriers such as financial constraints, family obligations, and socio-emotional maladjustment, which directly affect academic outcomes and subjective well-being [12, 24].

Against the background of the limitations of reactive models, the paradigm of proactive advising is being

intensively consolidated. It implies a preventive logic of interaction in which advisors, mentors, and other support professionals initiate contact at the early stages of the educational trajectory, build trusting relationships, identify risk factors in advance, and promptly offer relevant resources [13, 24]. Empirical data indicate that this strategy strengthens academic self-efficacy, improves retention indicators, reinforces the sense of belonging to the university community, and promotes more rational use of the institutional support infrastructure [25]. To operationalize proactive practices, digital platforms are increasingly being employed, for example Navigate360 by EAB, which, based on the analysis of data on academic performance, attendance, and course selection, make it possible to identify groups at elevated risk and initiate timely targeted interventions [23].

However, even the most advanced technological solutions have built-in limits. They carefully record quantitative academic and administrative indicators (grades, credit accumulation, attendance) but capture to a much lesser extent the qualitative, more difficult to measure dimensions of the student experience. Thus, a system may fail to detect a problem in a high-achieving student who is simultaneously experiencing a pronounced sense of loneliness and social isolation. At this junction, a model of targeted interactions is critically important, functioning as a kind of human API that ensures the collection, interpretation, and translation of qualitative observations into manageable actions. In a personal conversation, a resident mentor picks up nonverbal cues, nuances of intonation, and fleeting mentions of homesickness or communication difficulties; this unstructured information is transformed into a structured, operationalizable insight, for example into a note in the system with the tag loneliness or into a personalized referral to a counselling center. Thus, the model of targeted interactions does not replace digital platforms but complements them, forming a genuinely holistic hybrid architecture of support that takes into account both academic parameters and the socio-emotional contours of the student experience [16, 17].

The central object of this study is a model of intentional interactions, illustrated through a case study from Nova Southeastern University. In essence, this represents a paradigm shift in work with students residing on campus: instead of a focus on mass, often impersonal activities, the emphasis is shifted toward building individualized, trusting relationships.

The model is based on assigning each resident mentor a specific group of students on their floor. Throughout the semester, the mentor conducts a series of planned, structured one-on-one conversations (that is, intentional interactions), each of which addresses a specific task: at the initial stage, facilitating acquaintance and adaptation; in the middle of the semester, discussing academic dynamics and the degree of social inclusion; closer to the end, focusing on career planning and developmental trajectories. Drawing on the information obtained during these contacts, the mentor assumes the role of navigator and purposefully aligns the student's needs with relevant university resources, events, student organizations, and opportunities for professional growth [18, 19].

To ensure that the interaction does not devolve into a formal survey procedure but becomes a substantive and genuine dialogue, mentors receive training in active listening techniques. One of the most effective practices is the OARS model, originating from motivational interviewing [30]:

– O (Open Questions) — open-ended questions that encourage extended responses going beyond binary yes/no;

– A (Affirmations) — affirmations and recognition of the student's strengths and efforts, reinforcing their self-efficacy;

– R (Reflective Listening) — reflective listening with paraphrasing and clarifying synthesis of what has been said, demonstrating understanding and elucidating meaning;

– S (Summarizing) — summarizing, which records the key outcomes of the conversation and aligns subsequent steps.

– A systematic data collection process is an integral component of the model. Following each conversation, the mentor enters brief confidential notes into a specialized system, using standardized tags (for example, #academic_difficulties, #loneliness, #search_for_internship, #conflict_with_roommate). This protocol simultaneously serves two purposes: it ensures continuity in the support of a particular student and, after aggregation and anonymization of the data sets, provides the residence hall administration with an instrument for identifying general trends and systemic bottlenecks that require managerial intervention at a higher level [20, 21,

30]. work demonstrates its advantages (Table 1).

Comparison of this model with the traditional format of

Table 1. Comparative analysis of the traditional support model and the targeted interactions model (compiled by the author on the basis of [8, 22, 29, 30]).

Criterion	Traditional model (event-oriented)	Targeted interactions model
Primary objective	Provision of leisure and control, information dissemination	Proactive identification of needs, facilitation of adaptation and development
Role of staff (RA/Mentor)	Organizer of events, administrator, guardian of order	Mentor, coach, liaison with university resources
Key method	Group events, general meetings, information boards	Individual, structured one-to-one conversations
Success metric	Number of events held, participant attendance	Quality of interactions, number of successful referrals to resources, dynamics of student retention
Focus of support	Reactive (response to incidents)	Proactive (prevention of problems, facilitation of growth)
Student experience	Passive consumption of services, anonymity in the mass	Personalized attention, a sense of being seen and heard

The process cycle of the model can be visualized in the form of the diagram presented in Figure 1, which emphasizes its systemic and recurring nature.

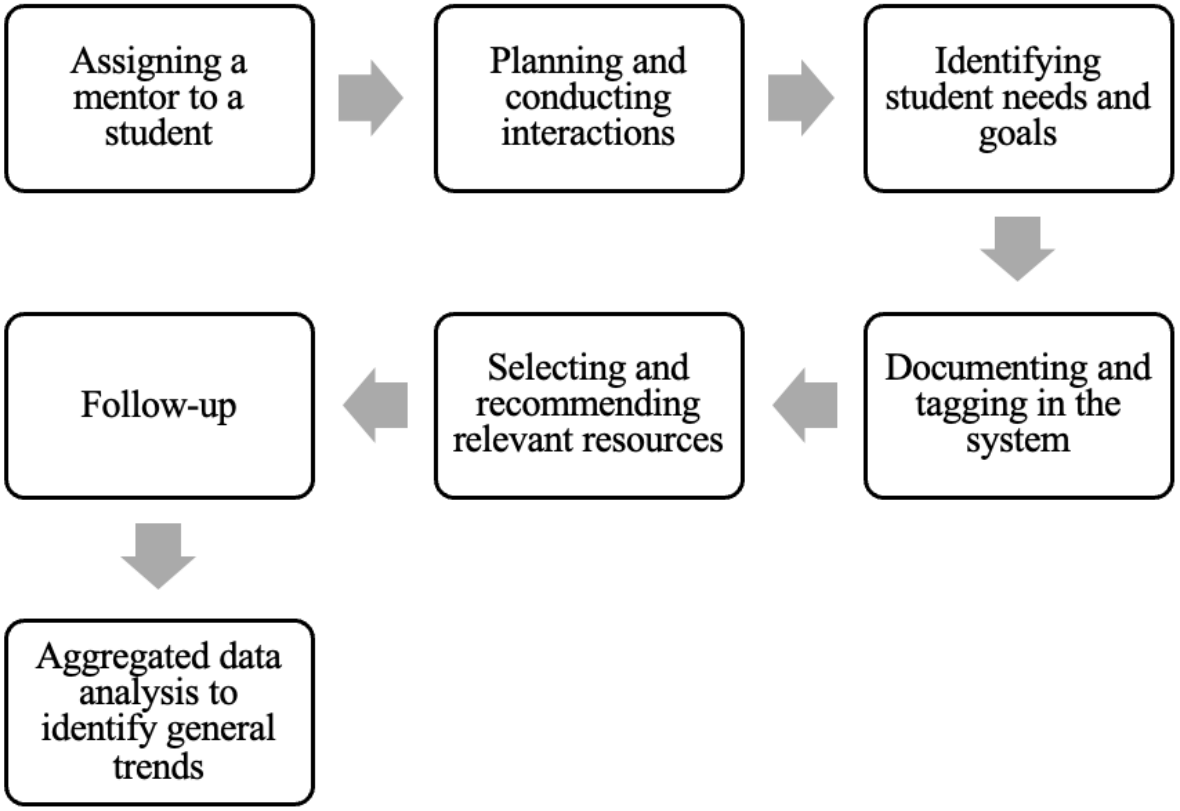

Fig. 1. Process model of the cycle of targeted interaction (compiled by the author based on [15, 26, 27]).

The presented scheme demonstrates that individual contacts with the student (steps 2–7) operate at two levels: they produce a tangible effect for the specific learner and simultaneously generate a dataset for subsequent macro-level analysis (step 8). This provides the administration of student services with a basis for decisions aligned with the real, empirically substantiated needs of the community rather than with hypothetical assumptions.

The effectiveness of the model of targeted interactions is confirmed both by diagnostic assessment of the current state of the student environment and by cumulative empirical data on the effectiveness of mentoring programmes. Visualization of the statistics serves as a key instrument that makes it possible to clearly explain the scale of the problem and the potential returns from the proposed approach.

As already noted, despite the positive dynamics in indicators of depression and anxiety (Fig. 2), the deficit of social ties remains a significant challenge.

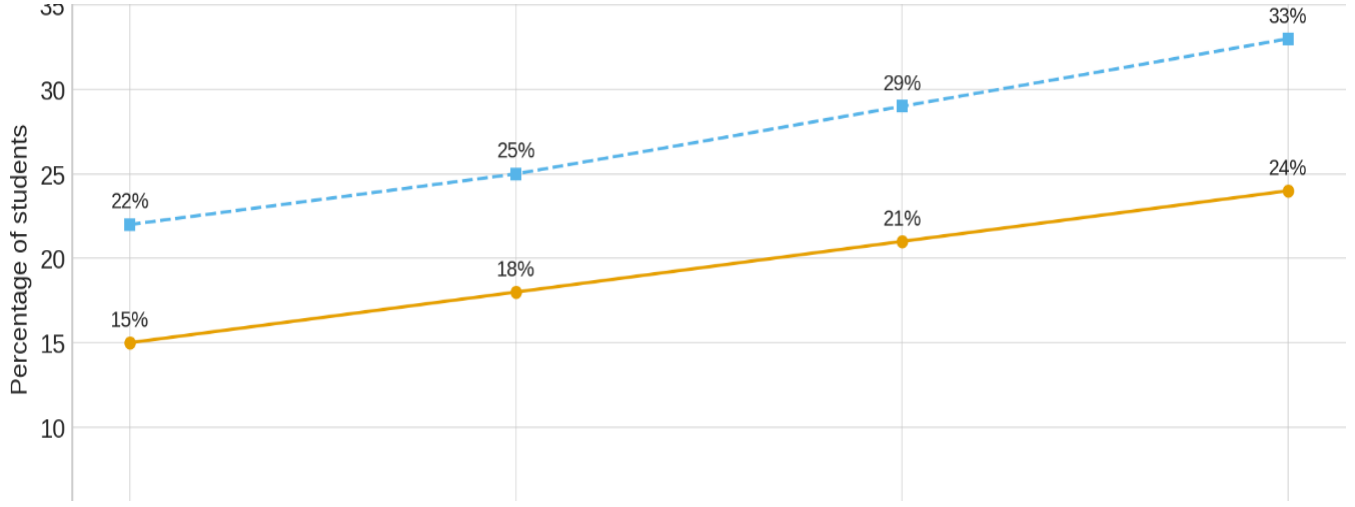

Fig. 2. Dynamics of students' mental health indicators, 2022–2025 (compiled by the author based on [1, 2]).

Data from Ohio State University (Fig. 3) demonstrate a distinct gap: although the overwhelming majority of students report having supportive relationships and a sense of belonging to the community, almost half of them at the same time fall into the category of lonely. This imbalance indicates that formally existing ties do not necessarily convert into rich, high-quality communication capable of preventing the experience of isolation.

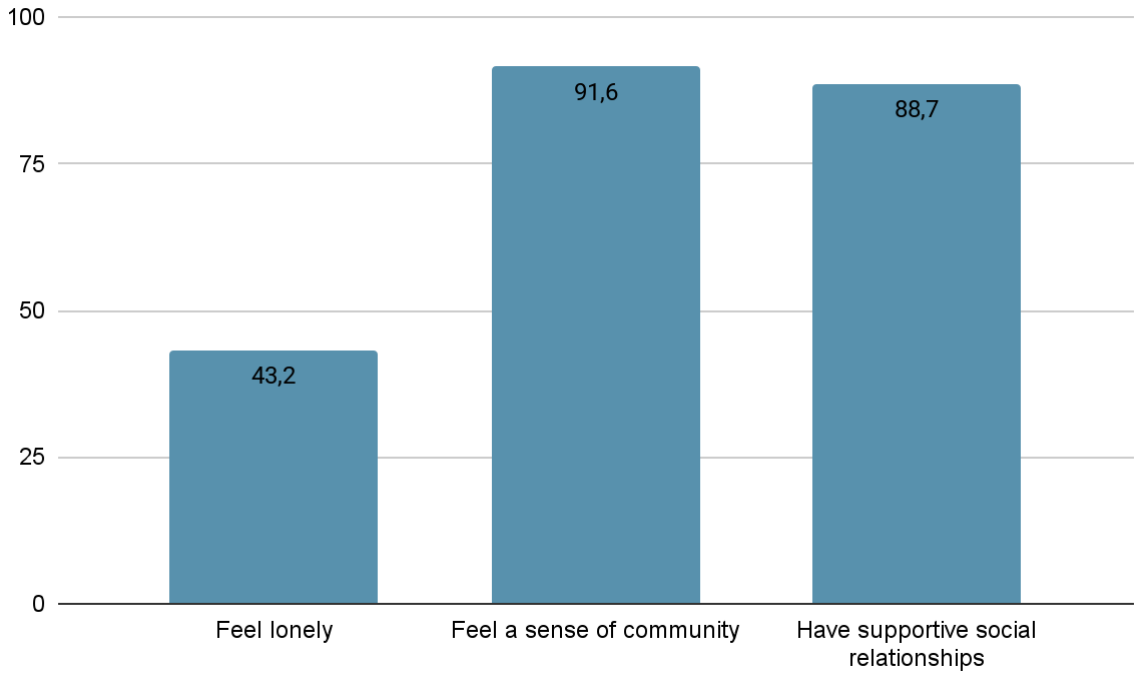

Fig. 3. Social well-being of students at The Ohio State University, 2025 (compiled by the author based on [3]).

It is precisely the elimination of this gap that personalized mentoring programs are designed to achieve. Empirical data provide compelling evidence of their high effectiveness: learners who receive mentor support exhibit higher academic performance, rate the quality of their educational trajectory more highly, and develop a more robust professional identity [6]. However, the key argument in favor of integrating such programs is their direct effect on cohort retention. A classical study by the Wharton School demonstrated fundamentally different retention trajectories: among program participants, retention reaches 72% for mentees and 69% for mentors, compared to 49% for students not participating [28]. This reveals a gap of 23 percentage points, a figure of exceptional statistical and practical significance (see Fig. 4).

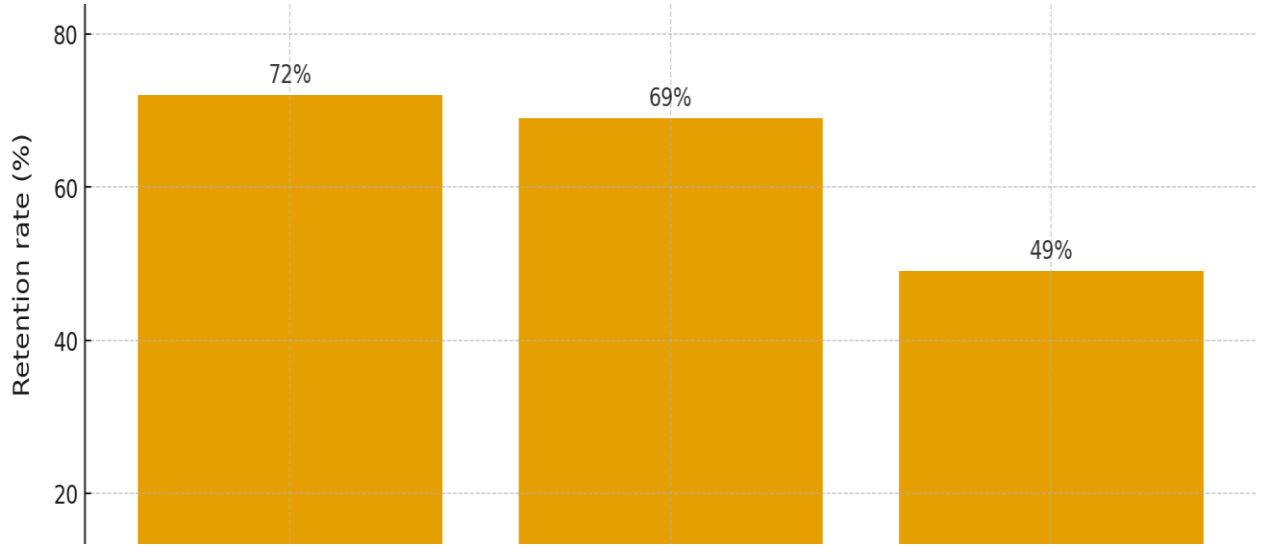

Fig. 4. The impact of participation in a mentoring program on retention (compiled by the author based on [28]).

Empirical data make it possible to revise prevailing assumptions about the economics of implementing the model. A common objection is that personalized support programs are too expensive due to the high labor costs of staff [14]. However, calculation of the overall return on investment (ROI) demonstrates the opposite: even a slight increase in retention indicators by several percentage points is converted into substantial tuition revenues preserved, measured in millions. The targeted interaction model does not imply simply increasing the budget, but requires its fine retuning: the hours of resident mentors previously spent on low-efficiency mass activities are redirected into focused, demonstrably more productive individual contacts. Consequently, staff time should be treated not as costs, but as capital investment in retention, which pays off many times over through reduced attrition. Thus, the economic focus shifts from a logic of perceived unaffordability to a logic emphasizing that refusal to implement such measures is itself economically unjustifiable.

The implementation of the targeted interaction model yields systemic dividends for all participants in the educational process, but is associated with organizational challenges that require prudent management.

– For students: the key effect is targeted support that accelerates integration into the university environment, reduces feelings of social isolation, and strengthens academic and extracurricular engagement. Regular contacts with a mentor contribute to the development of self-determination skills, the setting of attainable goals, and timely access to resources, which collectively improve academic outcomes and enhance subjective well-being [7, 9].

– For mentors: the function of the resident mentor shifts from administration to development. Participation becomes a formative educational experience within which critically important soft skills are strengthened: leadership, empathy, interpersonal and intercultural communication, emotional intelligence, and socially responsible leadership. This experience simultaneously enriches the mentor's own learning trajectory and increases graduates' competitiveness in the labor market [7].

– For the university: at the institutional level, the primary gain is retention, which directly affects the financial sustainability and reputational capital of the university. The model fosters a healthier and more supportive climate in residences, enables resource allocation based on empirical data, and reduces the frequency of crisis episodes requiring emergency intervention [10, 28].

In turn, despite the existing advantages, there are also limitations:

– Lack of time and risk of mentor burnout: resident mentors combine the role of advisor with an intensive academic workload. Regular conversations may increase the risk of overload and emotional exhaustion, as confirmed by studies demonstrating high stress levels among RAs [14]. Therefore, clear standardization and structuring of expectations are required (for example, 2–3 conversations per semester per student), as well as formal integration of these tasks into job responsibilities with adequate compensation (housing, scholarship) and mandatory training with ongoing methodological support and supervision from professional staff.

– Mismatch of expectations and unsuccessful pairing: the effectiveness of mentoring is determined by the quality of interpersonal fit; misalignment of goals, values, or communication styles renders the contact formal and of little benefit [11, 14]. To minimize this problem, it is necessary at the outset to conduct joint sessions on goal setting and alignment of expectations. Where possible, the process should draw on data about students' interests and background for more precise matching, and also provide for a procedure to change the mentor in the absence of positive dynamics.

– Quality assurance and scaling: as coverage expands, it becomes difficult to maintain a stable level of quality across thousands of individual conversations and to assess their results objectively. To address this issue, it is important to introduce a standardized assessment framework based on rubrics for recording progress on key parameters, to conduct systematic analysis of tagged notes to identify trends and risk areas, and to carry out regular sample surveys of students to obtain feedback on the quality of interactions [31]. Mentor training should be continuous and include the analysis of complex cases.

– Confidentiality and ethical boundaries: during conversations, sensitive topics may arise (mental health, violence, suicidal intent); unskillful handling of such information is fraught with serious consequences. Mandatory, comprehensive training is required on issues of confidentiality, its legal and ethical limits (including situations involving threats to life and health), as well as

the development of clear escalation protocols and procedures for referring complex cases to relevant specialists (psychologists, dean's office), so that the mentor is not left one-on-one with a problem beyond the scope of their competence.

Conclusion

The conducted analysis indicates that, despite all advances in clinical support, the contemporary university environment is experiencing a pronounced rupture of social ties among students. The persistently high level of perceived loneliness demonstrates the limitations of conventional, event-centered formats of support, which are oriented toward large-scale activities: such formats do not take into account students' individual needs for building meaningful relationships and experiencing a sense of belonging to a community.

The model of purposeful interactions offers a scientifically validated, proactive, and personalized response to the problem of social isolation. By shifting the focus from the organization of events to the development of targeted interpersonal connections, it makes it possible to identify students' academic, social, and emotional difficulties in a timely manner and to provide precise support that is relevant to their needs.

The synthesis of theoretical foundations, empirical data on the effectiveness of mentoring, and the material of a practical case study confirms the proposed hypothesis. Structured mentoring in residences, implemented through purposeful interactions, serves as an effective mechanism for enhancing well-being and engagement, which, in turn, contributes to improved student retention rates. At the same time, the effect is bidirectional: the model not only supports mentees, but also transforms the role of the resident mentor from predominantly administrative to developmental, deepening their own educational experience and fostering key professional competencies.

The practical significance of this work lies in providing heads of student services and residence professionals with a concrete, scalable, and economically sound model for the transition from a reactive to a proactive support system. The article proposes tools for staff training, regulations for the organization of interactions, and approaches to evaluating their effectiveness. The implementation of the model of purposeful interactions can substantially strengthen the inclusivity, care, and supportive nature of the university environment, in which every student feels seen, heard, and valued as a member of the academic community.

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