Course-based Outreach Teams (C-BOT): Beyond EASE Reports

***Strategic Plan Theme*: Student Success**

***Funding Level*: Between $1-5 million**

***Facility Needs*: Adjustments to existing facilities will be needed**

***Submitting Unit*: CNS/Chemistry**

Collaborating colleges/departments/units involved with this proposal.

Course instructors, GTAs, and ULAs in large-enrollment courses serving first-year students across colleges; REHS; NSSC; academic advisors; CUED; APUE; Graduate School; CTLI; Multicultural Business Coaches; other student support units; MSU IT (contact tracking and referral system; report generator for D2L Gradebook); Institutional Research

What is the proposal's big theme or idea?

Students who do not engage in a course through attending class and/or completing assigned work are unlikely to have a successful outcome. Over the past two years, the numbers of students who enroll in a course and then never participate as well as students who disappear at some point during the semester have increased.

We propose to embed Course-based Outreach Teams (C-BOT) in large-enrollment courses with significant populations of first-year students across the University to 1) engage or reengage students who are not participating, 2) connect students struggling because of nonacademic challenges to resources, 3) offer encouragement, and 4) normalize asking questions and seeking help. Teams comprised of a GTA and ULA would be responsible for reaching out to students who are at risk for an unsuccessful course outcome with personalized email messages tailored to each student's particular situation. Seeing that someone cares enough to check in and express concern if students have been absent, missed assignments, done poorly on an assignment, or self-identified as facing challenges can make a difference. This counteracts the perception held by some students that no one notices or cares when they are not participating in large-enrollment courses by creating a culture of care.

Many instructional teams are already stretched thin by managing day-to-day operations and responding to students who are participating. Having a team dedicated to this work will permit a more proactive approach to identifying issues early, connecting with students who are at risk, and persisting in efforts to reach these students when initial attempts fail. Email from a member of the instructional team establishes a more personal and direct connection with the course than the messages automatically generated by the EASE report system and follow-up email from academic advisors. A student can simply hit "reply" to reach someone from the course team.

When the course-level intervention of sending email is unsuccessful, course-based teams would partner with REHS and/or NSSC to expand the outreach effort to non-responsive students. An acknowledged shortcoming of the existing EASE report system is its reliance on students to read and respond to emails from the system and/or advisors. The two-year live-on requirement offers an opportunity to reach out to non-responsive first- and second-year students in person, going beyond what currently happens with EASE reports. It would be necessary to establish a system through which instructors could make a referral for direct contact from a trained "peer outreach assistant" or student affairs professional, who could visit the student in the residence hall. In situations where additional support is needed, the course-based team would make referrals to an appropriate unit on campus. Ideally, a system could be built to track attempts to contact students, contacts made, and actions taken and to route referrals from course team to campus partners.

What is the proposal's goal?

The immediate aims of C-BOT are to 1) identify students who are at risk for poor outcomes early in large-enrollment courses serving first-year students and 2) engage with and support these students so that they satisfy degree requirements and earn credit toward graduation the first time that they enroll in a course. Failing a prerequisite course can delay a student by as much as a year, particularly in highly structured programs where impacts can cascade. This work will also support students' growth toward becoming independent, self-regulated learners as they transition to MSU preparing them for future success and help students learn about resources available at MSU and how to access them.

Define the significance, or impact of your big idea.

Courses with large numbers of first-year students are proposed for this intervention because a successful transition from high school to MSU is critical to retention, persistence, and increasing the six-year graduation rate. The immediate impact would be reduction of DFW (D's, F's, and withdrawals), probation, and recess rates. In addition, students from populations where graduation gaps exist often do not arrive at MSU with the same understanding of the expectations in college courses or how to navigate the University as more privileged peers. Personalized contact from a course-based outreach team member builds a relationship and conveys the message that there is a supportive community invested in their success, which may lower barriers to seeking help. Student success in early courses builds self-efficacy and removes a factor that can increase time to degree.

The addition of course-based outreach teams to large-enrollment courses will support the work of faculty and academic staff teaching these courses and potentially increase their satisfaction. Most care deeply about student learning and success but often do not have the capacity to add targeted and persistent outreach to students who are not engaging on top of their existing responsibilities for curriculum design, teaching, and managing these large courses.

This project would build upon and expand existing efforts across the University to reach students who are not engaging with courses. A current initiative in MTH 101 led by Dr. Rachael Lund illustrates the envisioned work of course-based outreach teams. MTH 101 has a GTA and ULA whose assigned responsibilities are to closely monitor student engagement and then reach out by email to students who are not participating or appear to be falling behind. The GTA and ULA also work with students on developing a plan to catch up and check in on their progress. Lund has also implemented periodic check-in surveys. When students self-identify as facing challenges (physical or mental health issue, grief absence, food or housing insecurity, financial...), the GTA or Lund reach out to connect them with appropriate resources. Preliminary assessment has shown that student perception of socio-emotional support from the instructional team is positively related to student engagement. The MTH 101 team is currently tracking 120-130 of the ~600 students enrolled in SS22. Most students contacted by the GTA or ULA have responded. However, 16 students have not responded to 15 email messages. Partnership with REHS or NSSC offers the opportunity to reach these students through direct contact.

Who will be impacted?

Undergraduate students, instructors, GTAs, and ULAs in large-enrollment courses serving first-year students

What does sustainability for your proposal look like?

C-BOT will reduce the number of students who fail courses due to lack of engagement, reduce probation and recess rates, increase retention and persistence, and contribute to increasing the six-year graduation rate. This work will require ongoing investment because each year brings new first-year students finding their way at MSU and large-enrollment undergraduate courses are likely to persist. This initiative will aim for continuous improvement informed by assessment of its impact on student outcomes and feedback from students, instructors, GTAs, and ULAs. With demonstrated efficacy, this effort could be extended to large-enrollment, second-year courses.

Development of centralized training for instructors, GTAs, and ULAs will be necessary to fully realize the goals of supporting student academic and nonacademic needs. Engaging with students facing difficult situations requires skill, sensitivity, and empathy. This work includes a coaching element, which could connect to academic coaching efforts on campus. The Center for Teaching and Learning Innovation (CTLI) and Graduate School are potential partners in developing and sustaining training.

An expected outcome is a connected community of centrally trained instructors, GTAs, and ULAs prepared to provide socio-emotional and academic support in courses across MSU's colleges, who can share challenges and learn from each other. In building this community, it is essential for ULA recruitment and selection to intentionally look beyond academic high achievers to include students who have different skills and/or have faced challenges, including initially struggling in a course before figuring it out. This will give a more diverse group of students the opportunity to develop identities as academic leaders. Over time, systems developed to support C-BOT, such as instructor, GTA, and ULA training and IT tools, should be offered to the entire university community to extend the culture of care beyond the initially targeted courses to make it an integral part of the fabric of MSU. Building this culture will extend the impact beyond the students directly targeted for outreach.