



THE iCARE PROGRAM AT JERSEY COLLEGE

History

The iCare program was born out of a heartbreaking tragedy that left an indelible mark on the Jersey College community. During the 2016 Thanksgiving season, the College organized its annual turkey basket giveaway to provide holiday meals for students facing financial hardship. One participant, a dedicated single mother of two and a nursing student, picked up her basket with gratitude the day before Thanksgiving. That evening, she lovingly prepared a meal and shared it with her children.

The following morning, on Thanksgiving Day, she dropped off her children at her mother's house before heading to work. Tragically, on her way, she stopped at a bridge and took her own life. Unbeknownst to her peers, instructors, or college staff, she had been silently battling unknown issues. Her death sent shockwaves through the Jersey College community, revealing a hidden need for emotional support that extended beyond academic assistance.

This devastating loss galvanized students, faculty, staff, and administration into action. In 2017, the college convened a task force to explore ways to address the emotional and personal challenges faced by students. After months of reflection and planning, the iCare program was launched as a proactive commitment to fostering a compassionate, connected community—one that ensures no student feels alone in their struggles.

Program Vision and Mission

The iCare Program is dedicated to fostering a nurturing and empathetic community rooted in authentic, personal bonds between students and mentors (college faculty or staff). By cultivating strong, trust-based relationships, the program enhances students' educational experiences, offering non-academic support that equips mentors to identify critical moments when students may need guidance, encouragement, or resources to overcome educational and life obstacles. The mission is simple yet profound: to ensure every student feels seen, heard, and supported as they pursue their goals in nursing and beyond.

Program Goals

- *Build a Supportive Community:* Create a compassionate and inclusive environment where students feel valued and supported through meaningful connections with mentors, peers, and the broader Jersey College family.
- *Strengthen Mentor-Student Relationships:* Foster authentic, trust-based relationships between students and mentors to provide a source of emotional and personal support throughout the educational journey.

- *Enhance Student Success Beyond Academics:* Provide non-academic guidance that empowers students to navigate personal challenges—such as mental health struggles, family responsibilities, or financial stress—while pursuing their academic goals.
- *Develop Mentor Capacity:* Equip faculty and staff mentors with the skills, tools, and awareness to recognize signs of distress and respond with empathy, encouragement, or appropriate referrals.

Program Objectives

- *Facilitate Relationship Building*
 - Pair each incoming student with a mentor (faculty or staff volunteer) within the first two weeks of their first term to establish a foundation for ongoing support.
- Organize regular one-on-one check-ins (in-person or virtual) at least biweekly during the first term, transitioning to monthly or as-needed meetings thereafter.
- *Provide Non-Academic Support*
 - Develop and provide a resource hub for career counseling, mental health services, and community partnerships (e.g., local food banks or childcare programs) to address students' diverse personal challenges.
 - Engage and develop a supportive and caring community that encourages non-academic interactions and engagements, such as participation in charity events, holiday parties, dress-down days, and other activities.
 - *Train Mentors for Effective Engagement*
 - Conduct training sessions for mentors to enhance their ability to identify signs of struggle and provide appropriate encouragement or referrals.
 - Develop a digital “Mentor Toolkit” featuring conversation starters, empathy-building exercises, crisis response protocols, and a directory of campus and community resources, accessible via a dedicated iCare app or portal.
 - *Measure and Improve Program Impact*
 - Collect feedback via quarterly or annual surveys from students and mentors to evaluate the quality of the relationship, the effectiveness of support, and areas for growth, with the results reviewed by the iCare Committee.
 - Achieve a target of 80% student satisfaction with mentor support within the first two years, using data to refine mentor training, resource offerings, and program structure on an annual basis.

Role of the Mentor

Becoming an iCare Mentor is both an honor and a responsibility. Mentors serve as the human face of Jersey College's commitment to care, acting as a personal point of contact for students navigating the demands of nursing education. Typically, mentors meet with their assigned students on a weekly or biweekly basis, following a flexible yet structured schedule tailored to each student's needs. Each mentor is assigned a small group of 5-10 students to ensure that they receive meaningful, individualized attention.

Mentors wear many hats:

- *Sounding Board*: Providing a safe space for students to express their frustrations or share successes.
- *Information Provider*: Guiding students to resources like tutoring, counseling, or financial aid.
- *Compassionate Listener*: Offering empathy and validation to foster a sense of belonging and emotional well-being.

Through these roles, mentors help students feel anchored in the Jersey College community, reinforcing that they are not alone in their journey.

Appointment of Mentor

During orientation or Student Success Day (held within the first week of each term), every new student at Jersey College is paired with an iCare mentor. Where possible, the pairing process considers shared interests, career goals, or personal backgrounds to encourage rapport. Students may request a mentor change if the relationship does not meet their needs, ensuring a good fit.

Contact Points

Initial mentor-mentee meetings occur within the first week—ideally at Success Day—via in-person, email, or virtual check-ins, accommodating busy schedules. Key touchpoints include: (i) weeks 1-3 of the first term, (ii) before the first exam, (iii) before midterms, and (iv) before finals. After the first term, mentors and students are encouraged to maintain contact through monthly or term check-ins.

Poppy Pin

Mentors receive a symbolic Poppy Pin upon joining the program, a visible marker of their role as an iCare advocate. The pin's design carries deep meaning:

- The poppy flower symbolizes remembrance and hope, echoing the program's origin story and its alignment with the compassionate ethos of nursing.
- The iCare font, styled after NurseLife, ties the program to the ideals of care, dedication, and service that define the profession.

All mentors should wear their pins while on campus to further foster the support and hope of the iCare program.

iCare Mentor Support Services

Mentors receive:

- A branded virtual background for online meetings, reinforcing their iCare identity and creating a safe space.
- Access to a Mentor Email Resource Center featuring affirmations, motivational messages, and timely tips (e.g., support for finals).
- A private online forum where mentors can share their experiences and best practices.

Ongoing Mentor Development

Quarterly mentor meetings are held to bring iCare mentors together for professional growth and peer support. These 60-minute sessions, held in-person or virtually, feature guest speakers—such as psychologists, veteran educators, or nursing leaders—who offer actionable insights. Topics may include:

- Tools of the Trade
- Avenues to Initiate Culture Change
- Connecting with Students
- Mental Health Awareness
- Work-Life Balance
- Diversity and Inclusion
- Building Trust with Mentees
- Mentoring for Success

Mentor Recognition

To promote involvement and recognize excellence, the iCare program utilizes a mentor recognition program – a “Mentor of the Month”. The recognized mentor may receive, among other things, an iCare teddy bear—a cuddly symbol of their nurturing role—and a nominal gift card. Moreover, the mentor’s success is typically featured in the College’s newsletter and on social media, inspiring others to embody the iCare spirit.

Program Visibility and Feedback

The iCare program is woven into the fabric of Jersey College campuses. To promote such integration, marketing and other innovations are employed at each campus for the program. Marketing activities include (i) iCare Posters, featuring vibrant designs and the poppy motif, that adorn hallways, student lounges, and cafeterias and (ii) an annual “iCare Day” event.

To promote real-time input and continuous improvement, iCare posters and marketing materials include a QR code that links to a feedback form, allowing students to share their thoughts, suggest improvements, or nominate mentors. In this manner, the College ensures that the program continuously evolves.

Conclusion

The iCare Program stands as a testament to Jersey College's commitment to its students—not just as learners, but as individuals with unique stories, struggles, and strengths. By fostering authentic connections and providing unwavering support, iCare transforms the educational experience into one of hope, resilience, and community. In honoring the memory of the student lost in 2016, the program will ensure that every student has a lifeline to lean on, today and always.