Summer Search in numbers

· Years in operation:
31

· Regions Covered:
San Francisco Bay Area, Boston, New York City, Philadelphia, Seattle

· Number of alumni:
4,500

· High school graduation rate:
100%

· University entrance rate:
80%

SUMMER SEARCH

How an online Community can enhance mentoring quality

Guidelines for success from Summer Search

About Summer Search

Summer Search is a national youth development organization dedicated to helping students unleash their full educational potential, overcome barriers and build meaningful professional lives and careers.

The Summer Search program begins in the sophomore year of high school and continues up to 6 years beyond graduation, after which participants become alumni.

"Summer Searchers" receive a special form of mentoring, called "depth mentoring," which is delivered by a designated full-time paid professional mentor. The program includes two inspiring summer experiences (one after sophomore year, and one after junior year) and a post-secondary program that supports students in planning their next educational and career steps.

community
from gravyty

Summer Search connect

The post-secondary program gives Summer Searchers access to a broad network of staff, alumni, board, and corporate partners who are willing to mentor and guide them. As of 2021, management and execution of the post-secondary program created the Summer Search Connect Platform.

With 31 years of experience in the field, Summer Search was no stranger to running successful high-impact mentorship programs. However, switching program execution to a digital platform posed the following challenges:

Onboarding - Encouraging as many students, alumni, staff and board members as possible to sign up to Connect and use it as their first port-of-call for all Summer Search related activities.

Safety and conduct - Ensuring all stakeholders understand how to use Connect appropriately while maintaining user-safety.

Integration - Making the Connect platform an integral part of the Summer Search program.

Enhance and expand - Growing and improving the platform and its resources, making full use of digital and online features to create an easier, better, and more convenient experience for all stakeholders.

This case study features Summer Search's advice and tips for overcoming the challenges of running a successful mentorship program with an online community.

SUMMER SEARCH
CONNECT

Sign in

Welcome to Summer Search CONNECT

GET STARTED

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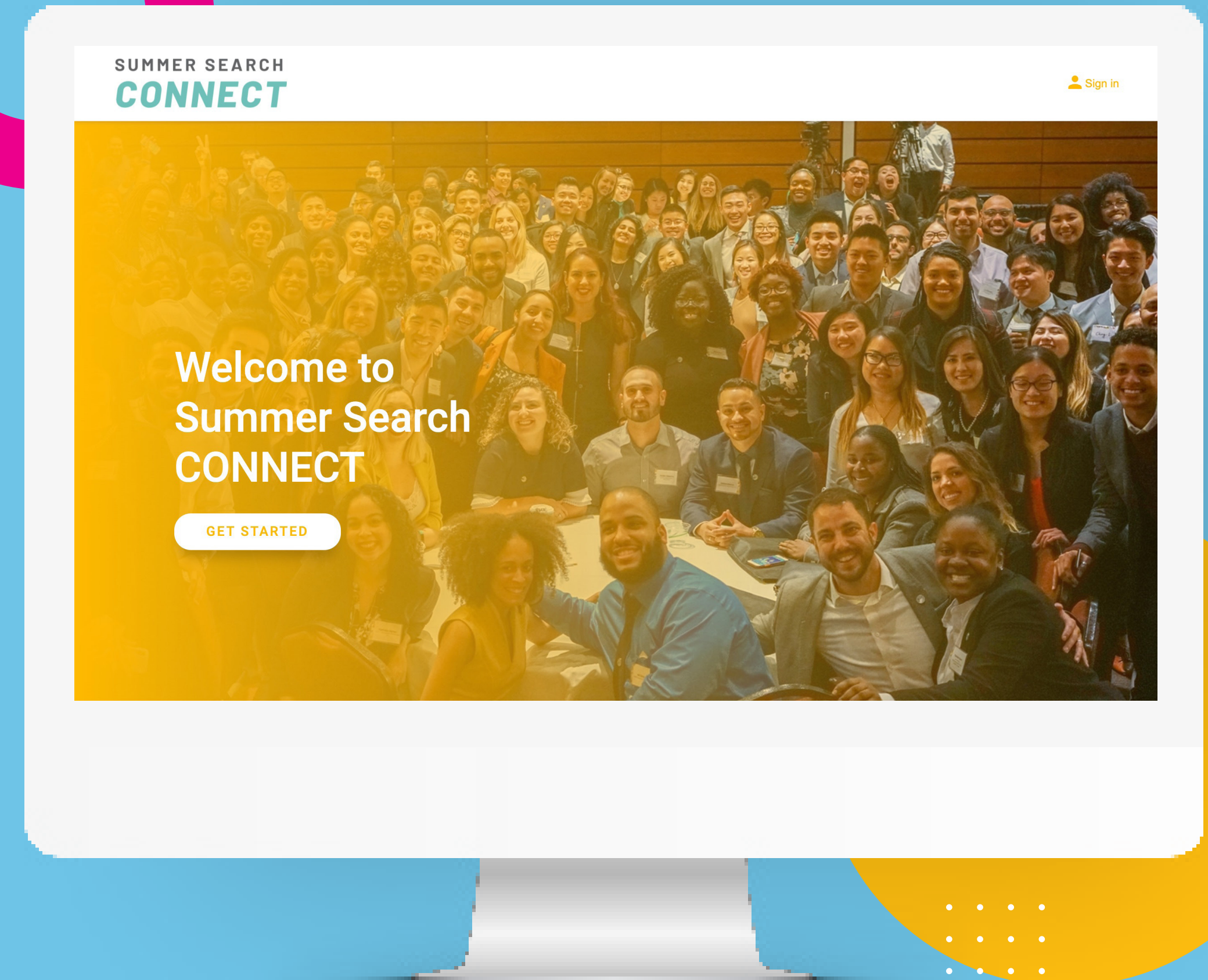
Executing a mentorship program with "Connect"

1. Onboard from the Start

Integrate all stakeholders - mentees, mentors, and staff alike - onto the platform as early as possible to get users in the habit of using your platform for all mentor-related activities.

Here are some tips:

From Linkedin to Connect

Mentors help mentees set up a LinkedIn account in their Sophomore year. This takes much of the friction out of moving to the Connect platform in their Junior year and gets mentees acclimated with using online platforms for mentorship activities.

Compulsory staff onboarding

All Summer Search staff and board members have a Connect account, whether they have a student facing role or not, and are encouraged to use it regularly. These key stakeholders can then play an active role in engaging mentees and students by posting relevant content and tagging students.

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2. Enforce safety & appropriate usage

Having high school students mingling on a platform together with adults and professionals poses unique challenges. Invest in setting the correct expectations from the start. This will mean all participants will be prepared to get the most out of the experience.

Here are some tips:

Safety controls

Work with a focus group to review the logistics of platform use and identify any safety concerns. Ensure that safety controls are built into the platform settings, for example by activating the "safeguarding" control so that platform administrators can view monitor messages going both ways if need be.

Mentor and partner training

Ensure mentors and corporate partners understand the rules of engagement and behavior. Sign a community agreement form guaranteeing correct conduct, and ensure that all associated guidelines are easily accessible in the resources section.

Mentee training

Interacting with professionals over Connect is very different to the other social media interactions high school students are accustomed to. Be sure to provide training geared towards helping mentees navigate the mentee-mentor relationship appropriately.

Parental consent

Ask parents to sign consent forms relating to relevant mentorship programming activities including for use of the connect platform at the beginning of the program.

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3. Make the platform integral & essential

Moving certain mentorship activities to a digital platform requires users to make a behavioral change. To ensure new behaviors catch on and stick, you need to make the platform an integral and essential part of your program.

Here are some tips:

Build essential community

Drive home the community aspect of the platform by making Connect the only place to go to access the vibrant community of users. For example, students about to go on a summer experience are encouraged to reach out on Connect to other students going on the same trip which provides them with agency and a community of support, a main part of Summer Search's programming.

Create a hub

Move everything onto Connect from the career coaching program to calendar information, job search information, board meeting materials, and more. The goal is to create an exciting hub of information and activity that makes users want to stick around.

Robust resources

Invest in making your resources section comprehensive and easy to navigate. Whether a user wants to find out about safety protocol, financial aid, personal finance, accommodation, academic sustainability or anything else, the easier and faster it is for them to locate what they need in your resources section, the more likely they are to revisit next time.

Create login incentives

Train teachers, mentors, admins, and national and regional group leaders to create as many reasons for users to logon to the platform as possible. For example, by sending out digests targeting particular students and groups, tagging individuals in posts, posting essential materials such as meeting agendas online so users can only access them by logging on.

community
from gravyty
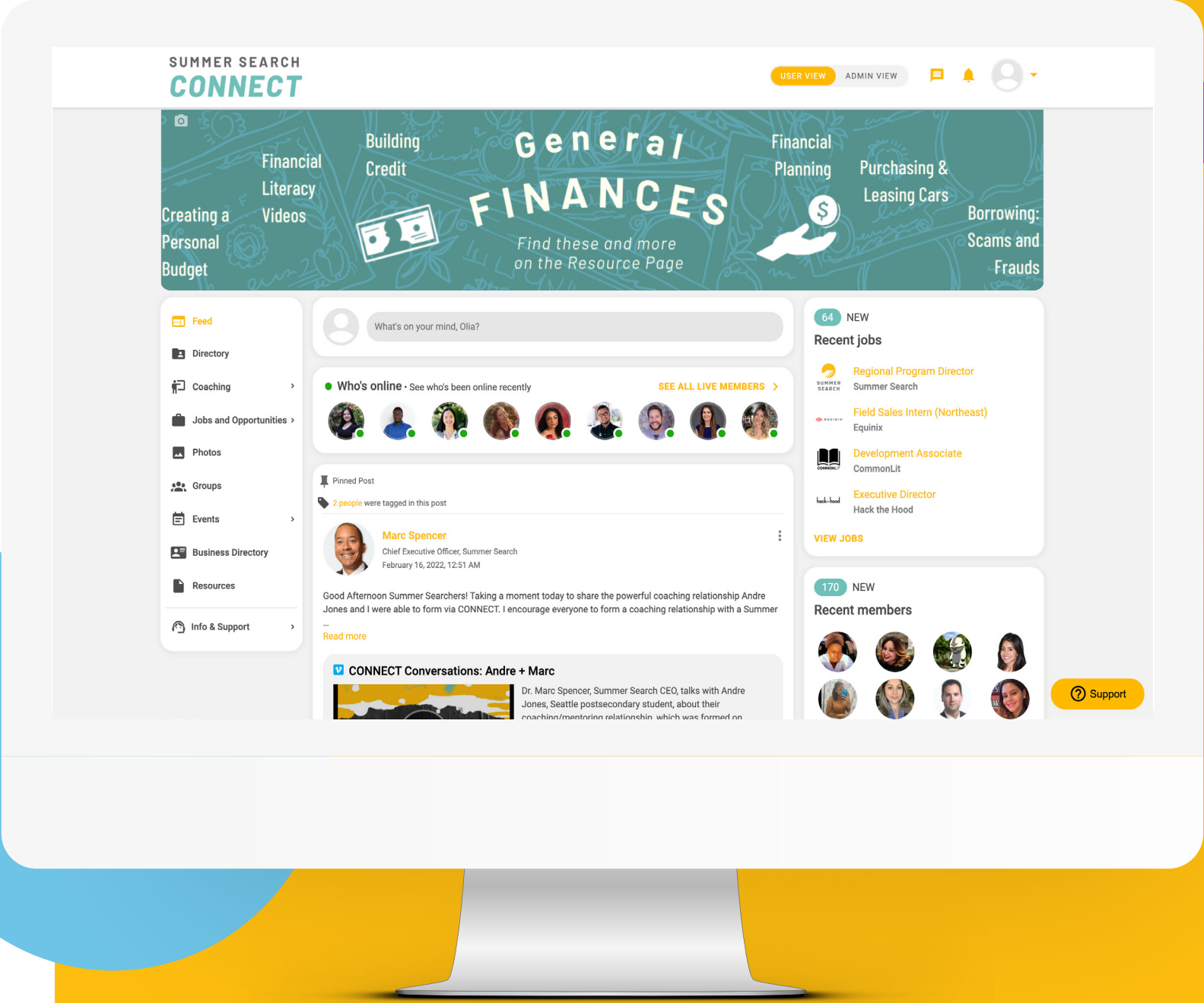
4. Track your performance

A dedicated digital mentorship platform offers unique tracking and data collection capabilities. KPI tracking helps you understand to what extent you are meeting your objectives and also allows you to make improvements in future years.

Here are some tips:

KPI tracking

Summer Search uses Connect's built-in metrics to track the number of registrations, the level of engagement, and other performance indicators.

Engagement index

Create an "engagement index" which tracks number of logins and the last login date for all staff and mentors. As it is essential for staff and mentors to login, post, tag, and interact on the platform daily, an engagement index can create accountability and allow managers and staff to set specific and measurable engagement targets to improve their

Display student engagement metric

Consider displaying student engagement metrics like last login date, registration date, and engagement score on each mentee profile. This allows mentors to instigate informed conversations with mentees. For example, they can say "I understand that you're nervous to go to college, but I see you haven't registered for Connect yet - did you know that there are resources on there that can help you."

"For the entire Summer Search program, we want to find the angles where the Connect platform can add value and assist in reaching our program outcomes."

Kelly Bonacci,
Project Manager of Summer Search Connect

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Looking ahead

Summer Search made great strides in getting users and stakeholders accustomed to using the Connect platform in 2021 and is continuing to do so in 2022:

Network size	Registered users
8,360	**2,454**

Building on this success, the goal for 2022 is to implement the best practices outlined in this study and encourage 100% of the potential network to register.
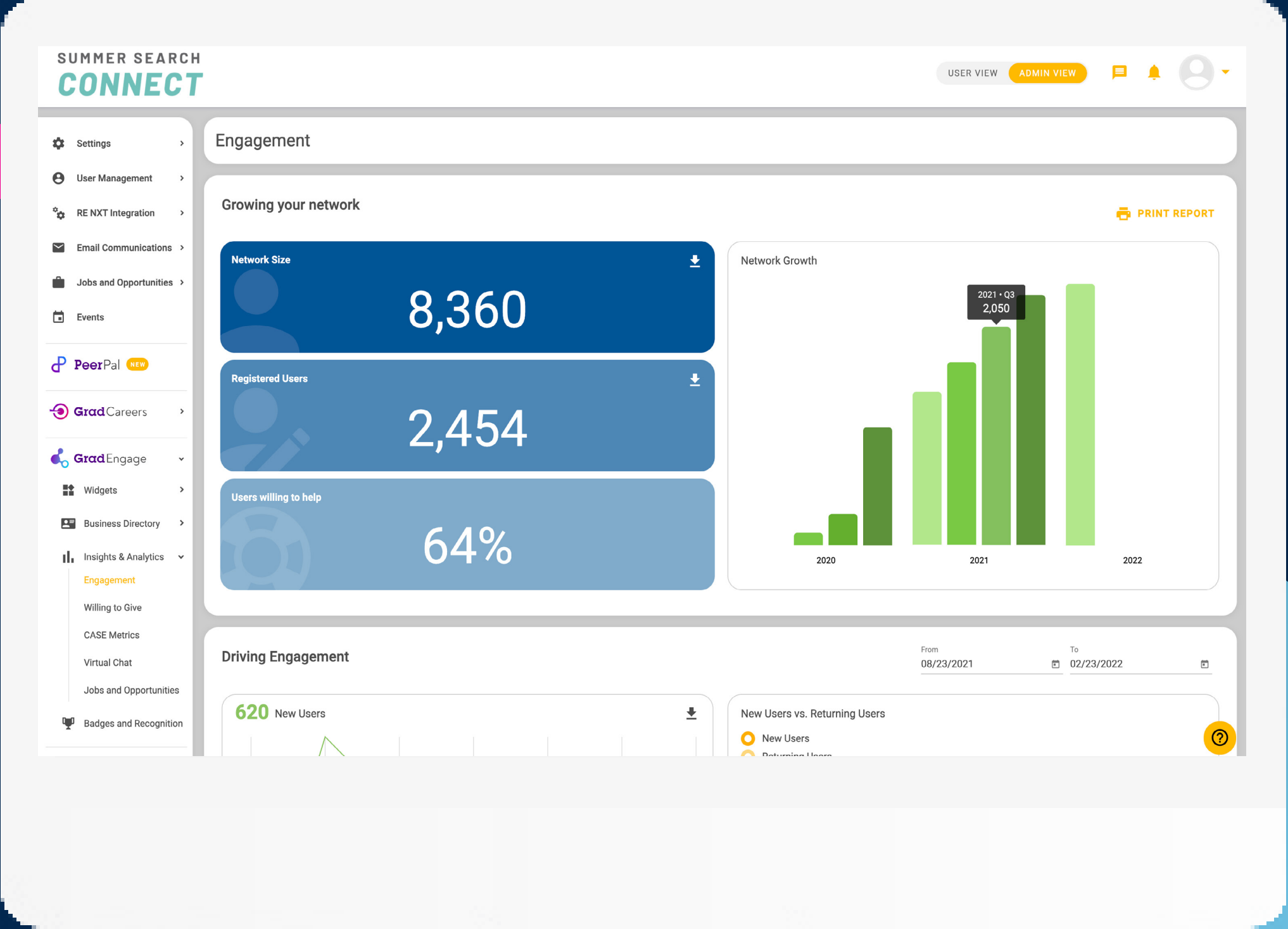
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