PASS

Promoting At-Promise Student Success

USC Rossier
Pullias Center for Higher Education

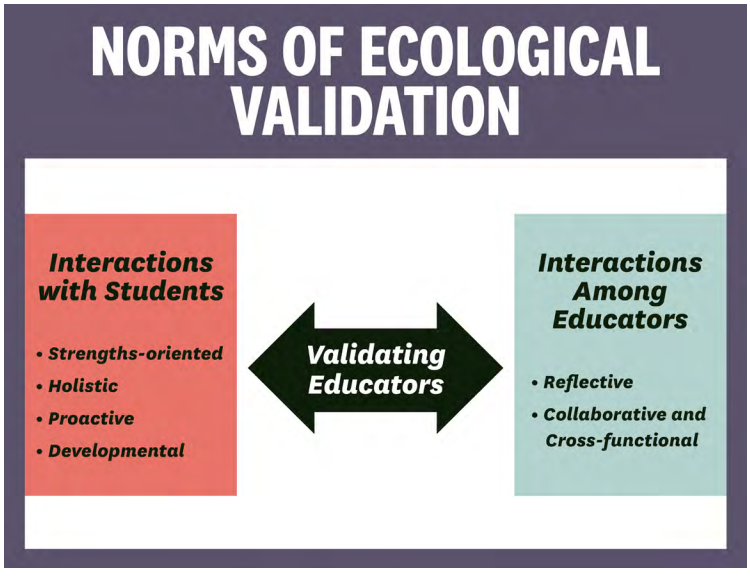
CREATING A CULTURE OF ECOLOGICAL VALIDATION TO IMPROVE AT-PROMISE STUDENT EXPERIENCES AND OUTCOMES

Postsecondary institutions continue to look for research-informed approaches to improve student experiences and outcomes. In particular, educators seek new strategies to support ***at-promise students***, which includes students from low-income backgrounds and those who will be the first in their family to graduate from college. Our research demonstrates the importance of collaborative, ecological, and affirming approaches to at-promise student support, which involve a network of staff, administrators, and instructors from across campus. The ecological validation approach[1] to support increases at-promise students' college sense of belonging, feelings of mattering, and confidence in their major and career path—each of which are linked to college success[2].

WHAT IS ECOLOGICAL VALIDATION?

Ecological validation is a research-based approach to supporting at-promise students that emerged from a study of the Thompson Scholars Learning Community (TSLC). Drawing from Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory and Rendón's validation framework, ecological validation recognizes that students engage with multiple people within an institution (e.g., instructors, support staff, and peers) and have relationships with many people outside of the institution (e.g., family, work colleagues, and peers). When multiple actors within a student's ecology—or web of support—collaborate on supporting and affirming students' capabilities for success, the student is better positioned to successfully navigate college. A validating approach to student support explores how to break down institutional silos, create experiences that affirm students' ability to be successful in college, and provide meaningful support so that students achieve their goals.

A culture of ecological validation creates conditions within an institution that center the strengths, needs and experiences of at-promise students through the implementation of six norms: holistic, proactive, strengths-oriented, developmental, collaborative and reflective practice. Four of the norms guide interactions with students; two guide interactions among educators like faculty, staff and administrators (see diagram).



NORMS OF ECOLOGICAL VALIDATION

In a culture of ecological validation, the educator...

Holistic: Considers all aspects of a student's background, characteristics, personality, and goals, as well as academic and interpersonal experiences in college when connecting them with resources and opportunities.

Proactive: Places the onus on institutional agents to regularly reach out to students to build relationships, address challenges, and identify opportunities.

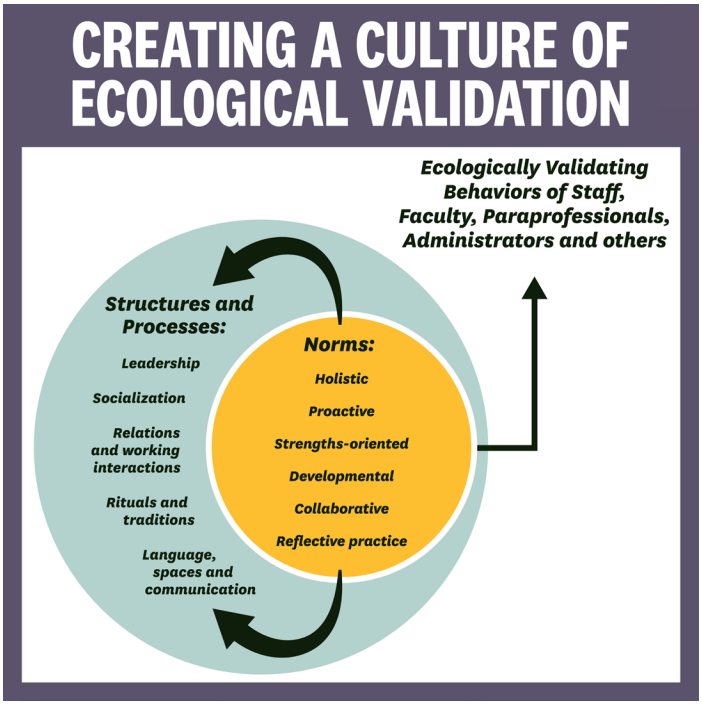
Strengths-oriented: Focuses on the assets, talents and skills, previous successes, and personality traits that students bring with them to campus rather than employing a deficit approach, which focuses only on the assumed challenges that at-promise college students may face.

Developmental: Involves supporting students throughout their educational journeys in a cohesive way from admission through graduation.

Collaborative: Explores ways to build connections across various campus services and programs to create integrated and reinforcing validating experiences across a student's ecology of support, which requires cross-functional work across departments, programs, support services and other aspects of academic and student affairs programming.

Reflective: Involves continually considering how students, staff, and leadership experience campus structures and processes to make shifts necessary to improve at-promise student success. This process uses both formal and informal data to inform decision-making and subsequent actions.

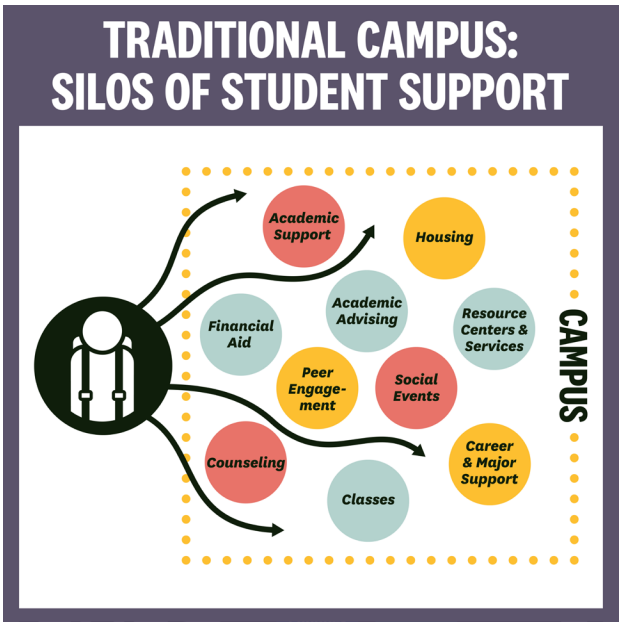
When these norms inform the structures and processes (e.g., leadership, socialization, relations and working interactions, rituals and traditions, and language, spaces and communication) of a postsecondary institution, potential exists for ecologically validating behaviors and practices to develop among staff, faculty, administrators and other educators. A culture of ecological validation moves away from the siloed approaches that exist in higher education and focuses on shifting institutional culture toward a more collaborative and cohesive approach to support at-promise student experiences and outcomes. The norms and ideas are not new in higher education; however, the framework focuses on being intentional about enacting all six norms to embed a culture of ecological validation into current higher education structures. This framework involves a comprehensive approach to addressing larger structural and cultural issues instead of focusing on siloed and piecemeal attempts to address smaller problems (e.g., a single, isolated intervention). A culture of ecological validation is an intentional and comprehensive approach that is best accomplished through cross-functional collaboration.

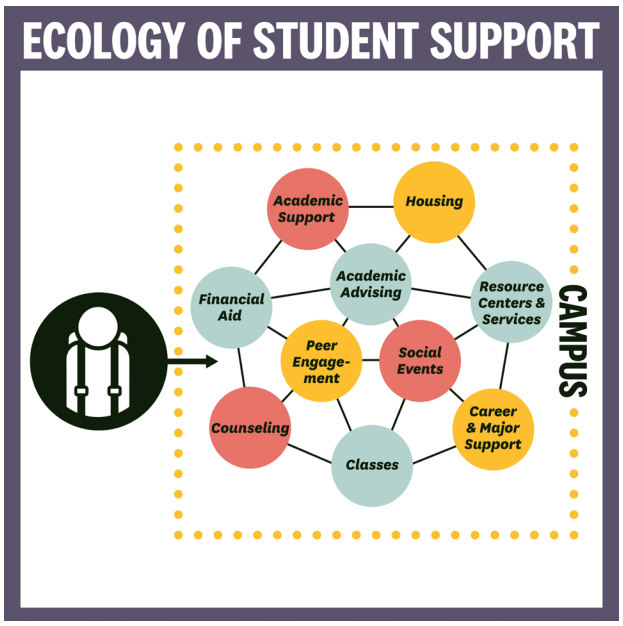


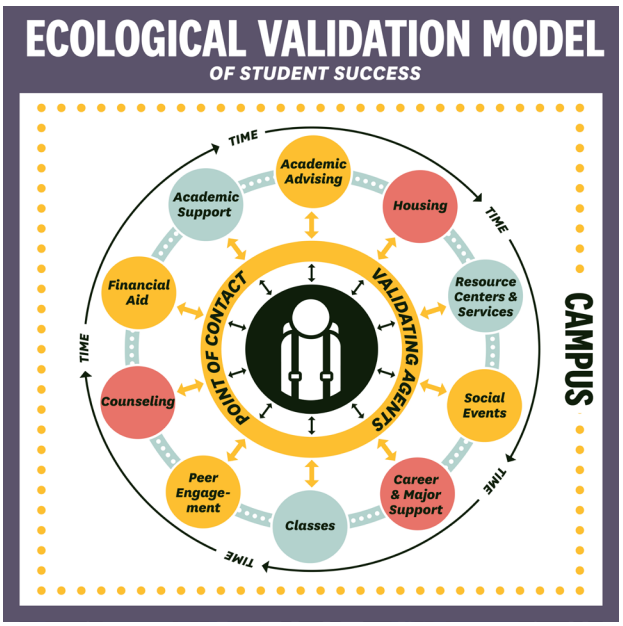
To further understand the difference between ecological validation and other approaches to student support, it may be helpful to consider alternative ways programs or institutions support students. In the images on the following page, the student has a backpack to symbolize their characteristics, goals, experiences, challenges and relationships that they bring with them to campus. The traditional campus involves ***silos of student support*** with different campus units working without interacting or collaborating with other units, often focused on responding to student needs reactively and delivery of a fixed set of services. The culture of this kind of siloed campus support can be challenging for students because it usually requires the student to (1) recognize they have a challenge for which they need support; (2) know that someone on campus might be able to assist; (3) find the appropriate person on campus who can offer that support; and, (4) initiate an interaction with that person or office. All four of these steps can be difficult for at-promise students who are often unfamiliar with campus supports and structures. With siloed support, if students engage with the wrong office or person, they may not be redirected to connect with someone better positioned to provide high quality, tailored support. In addition, the policies and practices within each unit may conflict, which can become an unnecessary additional barrier for students to navigate.

Many campuses have worked to create an ***ecology of student support*** (e.g., see middle figure on following page"), where various individuals and campus programs share a commitment to supporting at-promise students and communicate with each other to identify ways to address gaps in student services. One common example of this kind of support is a one-stop shop for student services where student support is centralized, and at times, coordinated. While an ecology of student support often removes barriers associated with conflicting policies, the student remains responsible for initiating requests for support and the ecology is not necessarily informed by a validating approach.

Ecological validation (e.g., see last figure on following page) adds a key additional element to the ecology of support—proactive outreach and validating messaging to students by educators across that web of coordinated student support.







With an ecological validation approach, the student is positioned in the center of a web of coordinated and aligned services. As illustrated in the graphics on the left, one important element of ecological validation that distinguishes it from the ecology of student support is the inclusion of validating agents. A validating agent (e.g., program practitioner, instructor) is an individual who proactively and holistically engages with students and connects them with opportunities and resources on the campus matched to their specific needs—and does so in a way that validates the students' experiences, capabilities for success, aspirations and plans. In an ecological validation approach to support, students clearly know who their point person is for guidance or support and the responsibility is on the point person to help the student navigate campus resources.

While ecological validation is particularly important in the first year when students are trying to understand how college processes work, they benefit from this form of support throughout college. First-generation college students, for example, are the first in their families to navigate upper-level courses in their majors and to figure out a career path after college. The transition from general education courses to major-specific classes can create a host of challenges and students may be unaware of opportunities available to them. Instructors in upper-level courses play an essential role in guiding at-promise students through the final stages of college as they prepare for careers and/or graduate or professional degree programs, as do advisors, internship coordinators, career center staff, and practitioners in programs where students demonstrate engagement. In this way, ecological validation is developmental and acknowledges that student needs, goals, challenges, and opportunities shift, unfold, and emerge over time.

HOW TO IMPLEMENT ECOLOGICAL VALIDATION?

Keeping in mind that *how* educators provide support to students is more important than *what* programs and offices exist, ecological validation involves people from across student support contexts (e.g., classrooms, academic affairs, student affairs, resource centers) collaborating over time in service of shared goals. Ecological validation generally involves five components:

1. ***Connect.***
   Be proactive in initiating connections with students, learning about students' needs and goals, and subsequently identifying campus resources, relationships, and spaces that align with those needs and goals.

2. ***Affirm.***
   Ensure that students have the resources and support they need to be successful. Clearly communicate resources that exist for students' use and acknowledge students' strengths and progress made.

3. ***Cultivate.***
   Acknowledge that students' needs and goals shift over time; build trust with students and continually acknowledge students' abilities for success; ensure goals and support are aligned; recognize that unexpected issues may emerge and support approaches might need to be adjusted.

4. ***Network.***
   Build a community of campus support embedded within a campus ecology; cultivate relationships with colleagues across campus to ensure warm, informed hand-offs when suggesting that students seek support in different campus locations; help students develop a network of supportive, validating relationships.

5. ***Sustain and Deepen.***
   Seek opportunities to engage in learning and strategizing with other colleagues about effectively supporting at-promise student success on an on-going basis. Work in cross-functional groups to implement changes that align with ecological validation. Reflect on progress and challenges and make adjustments to policies and practices accordingly.

DEFINITIONS

Validation[3] is a process where institutional agents – faculty, staff, administrators and peer mentors – show interest in students' academic success and personal well-being and affirm students' capabilities for college success while taking into consideration their assets and strengths. Validation theory centers how student support is delivered, rather than what support is delivered.

Ecology[4] refers to a social environment consisting of a network of interrelated relationships, structures, and processes. The impact of an ecology on student development is greater than the sum of its individual parts. In higher education, an ecology encompasses a web of college relationships, contexts, and resources that shape at-promise student success.

QUESTIONS TO GUIDE PRACTICE

- **What change efforts to support at-promise students currently exist at your institution?**
- **How does an ecological validation approach differ from existing efforts on your campus?**
- **In order to move your campus towards an ecology of validation, what shifts in structures and practices would need to happen? Who would need to be involved in envisioning and planning for these shifts? What type of data would help inform the change process? What type of budgetary support would be helpful?**

OVERVIEW OF STUDY

This brief highlights a central finding of the Promoting At-promise Student Success (PASS) project (***pass.pullias.usc.edu***). During the first phase of the mixed methods longitudinal study, conducted in partnership with the Thompson Scholars Learning Communities (TSLC), the research team explored whether, how, and why the TSLC programs develop key psychosocial outcomes critical for at-promise student success such as sense of belonging, mattering and academic self-efficacy. TSLC provides at-promise students with a comprehensive array of academic, personal, and social support services. Students participate in two years of structured programming and receive a generous scholarship that covers the cost of tuition and fees in the University of Nebraska system. Qualitative data were gathered through hundreds of longitudinal interviews with TSLC students, staff, instructors, and stakeholders, as well as through program observations and documents. Quantitative data were gathered through longitudinal surveys of students, including TSLC participants and students with similar characteristics who did not participate in TSLC, as well as analysis of administrative records.

The second phase of the PASS project expands the study focus to better understand the experiences of at-promise students who do not participate in TSLC programs and incorporates analysis of students' well-being, time navigation, and financial stress. We are also working with researchers and practitioner partners to cultivate a culture of ecological validation across there University of Nebraska campuses (see ***https://pass.pullias.usc.edu/professional-learning-communities/***).

For an extended discussion of ecological validation, including research articles and practitioner- oriented materials related to implementing ecological validation, please visit the project website: ***pass.pullias.usc.edu***. The complete list of research team members can be found on the project website.

SUGGESTED CITATION

Hallett, R., Kezar, A., Bettencourt, G., Kitchen, J., Perez, R., Reason, R., & Corwin, Z.B. (2024). ***Creating a culture of ecological validation to improve at-promise student experience and outcomes [brief].*** USC Pullias Center for Higher Education.

ENDNOTES

[1] Hallett, R. E., Kezar, A., Kitchen, J. A., & Perez, R. J. (2023). *Creating a Campus-wide Culture of Student Success: An Evidence-based Approach to Supporting Low-income, Racially Minoritized, and First-generation College Students*. Taylor & Francis.

[2] Melguizo, T., Martorell, P., Swanson, E., Chi, W. E., Park, E., & Kezar, A. (2021). Expanding student success: The impact of a comprehensive college transition program on psychosocial outcomes. *Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness, 14*(4), 835-860; Hypolite, L. I., Kitchen, J. A., & Kezar, A. (2022). Developing major and career self-efficacy among at-promise students: The role of a comprehensive college transition program. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice.*

[3] Rendón, L. I. (1994). Validating culturally diverse students: Toward a new model of learning and student development. Innovative Higher Education, 19(1), 33–51; Rendón, L. & Muñoz, S.M. (2011). Revisiting validation theory: Theoretical foundations, applications, and extensions. *Enrollment Management Journal, 5*(2), 12–33.

[4] Bronfenbrenner, U. (1994). Ecological models of human development. *Readings on the Development of Children, 2*(1), 37–43.