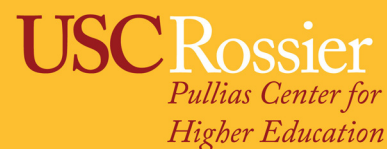




Promoting At-Promise Student Success



DESIGNING EFFECTIVE CAREER SUPPORT FOR AT-PROMISE POSTSECONDARY STUDENTS

OCTOBER 2026

This brief, intended for a higher education practitioner audience, identifies key qualities and characteristics of effective career support for at-promise college students. Drawing on the experiences of at-promise students, the brief highlights approaches that can strengthen students' confidence in navigating their major and career journeys in college, including relationship-centered, tailored, accessible, and experiential support.

TOPIC/ISSUE

A primary reason why at-promise students choose to attend college is to prepare for their future careers. A postsecondary education entails a significant investment of time and resources and institutions have a responsibility to ensure the postsecondary experience helps students prepare for and achieve their career goals. Quality career development and preparation activities are prime opportunities for educators to support students' confidence in navigating their academic and career pathways (i.e., their major and career self-efficacy). This brief identifies key qualities and characteristics of effective career development and preparation activities for at-promise college students.

DEFINITIONS

Major and Career Self-Efficacy (MCSE): The extent to which a student believes they are capable of successfully identifying and navigating a suitable major and career path given their interests, skills, readiness and experiences.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Colleges and universities offer a wide range of major and career development activities including career interest assessments, mock interviews, resume review sessions, career fairs, job shadowing, graduate school preparation, academic advising and career coaching, among others. Some of these activities are embedded in courses, others are offered as *opt-in* activities. However, not all experiences are equivalent – how programming is designed and implemented matters. Our study identified three key qualities and characteristics that shaped the effectiveness of career development experiences for at-promise college students at three midwestern universities.^{1,2}

➔ **Relationships, trust, and psychological safety are critical components of career support.**

Building a connection with educators and other stakeholders who provided career support and services was integral in promoting students' confidence in their ability to successfully navigate their major or career trajectory. Without efforts to build connections, career development support was less helpful. Students commonly expressed anxiety and worry around engaging with others in career preparation activities. Efforts on the part of educators and practitioners to build relational trust and create spaces of psychological safety helped promote effective career support.

KEY TAKEAWAYS (CONT.)

➔ **Personalized and curated career support is central to the efficacy of career support efforts.**

Students benefitted most from career support activities that were tailored to their lived experiences, interests, and goals. They valued educators and practitioners who engaged them as active participants and collaborators in their learning experiences and who acknowledged students' knowledge, goals, and aspirations as assets in their academic and career journeys. They similarly appreciated tailored, curated career support that was localized and targeted toward students' specific major/career pathway, interests, and/or goals over generalized, one-sized-fits-all advice or formulaic approaches to support.

➔ **Career support that provides real-world exposure and hands-on experience clarifies career pathways and boosts students' confidence.**

Career support activities that illustrated the practical, day-to-day realities of major and career pathways and provided field-specific insights supported students' confidence in making career path decisions. Activities both in and out of the classroom that demonstrated real world application helped students clarify their goals, connect what they were learning to potential career options, and strengthened their motivation to learn.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. Build rapport, psychological safety, and trust in career support spaces.** Dedicate effort to learn about students' goals, interests, and backgrounds in order to cultivate meaningful connections as a key element of career support efforts. Express curiosity and ask questions about students' experiences, concerns, interests, and aspirations in order to help them develop career goals and related plans; insights gained provide useful context to inform the career support. Efforts to cultivate connections with students should be expressly communicated by leaders as integral to effective career support and appropriately recognized and rewarded, and resources (e.g., time, staffing) should be appropriately allocated.
- 2. Tailor major and career guidance, support, and navigation.** Leverage information learned about students' goals, interests, and backgrounds as part of the connection building process to inform guidance and tailor advice to students' career needs and assets. Avoid one-size-fits-all guidance or formulaic frameworks that do not permit flexibility, and pursue processes and approaches that enable educators to adapt support to student needs, assets, and goals accordingly. Ensure educators have professional development opportunities that enable them to offer career guidance and support responsive to disciplinary and field differences, and/or create a repository of contacts that enables educators to connect students with discipline- and field-specific support that complements the guidance they can provide.³
- 3. Increase the accessibility and integration of career support.** At-promise students commonly face competing demands on their time, including paid work, family responsibilities, and transportation challenges. Embed major and career discussions, guidance, and support in spaces where students already are, such as classrooms, virtual spaces, clubs, and required advising or orientation meetings. Provide flexible opportunities to engage in career support through accessible modalities that are responsive to students' multiple and competing time obligations (e.g., asynchronous career exploration opportunities for working students). Integrate exposure to real-world careers and opportunities for students to apply their learning throughout the curriculum and co-curriculum.
- 4. Create structured opportunities for students to reflect on and integrate their academic and career-related experiences.** Provide guided opportunities for students to actively process their career-related learning, make connections across their academic and career-related experiences, and consider how those experiences collectively inform their major and career decisions. Research suggests that intentionally integrating and reflecting across multiple experiences can have benefits greater than those of individual experiences alone in promoting major and career self-efficacy. Educators can broaden students' perspectives as they make sense of their experiences and identify appropriate next steps.⁴

QUESTIONS TO GUIDE PRACTICE

- To what extent do these findings resonate with what you have observed in your own work to support career development among at-promise students?
- What approaches have you found successful in fostering rapport, psychological safety, and trust in career development spaces among at-promise students? What ideas do you have for extending or complementing these efforts?
- What opportunities exist to further tailor major and career guidance to students' individual goals, interests, backgrounds, and fields of study? What challenges exist to this approach and how might they be addressed?
- To what extent are academic and career guidance and support incorporated into spaces where students already engage (e.g., the classroom)? What opportunities exist to extend the reach for at-promise students given competing time demands and constraints (e.g., virtual spaces)?
- Where are the existing (co)curricular opportunities for students to apply what they are learning and experience real-world relevance? How might these be expanded or replicated in other academic and career support contexts?
- What spaces currently exist for students to reflect on and integrate their academic and career related experiences in a guided setting? Where are opportunities to expand these efforts?
- What sort of resources, support, or professional development would be helpful to educators and staff charged with implementing career development efforts?
- What opportunities are there to deepen or expand relationships with regional workforce stakeholders to support student career development (e.g., advisory boards, events)?

STUDY OVERVIEW

The Promoting At-promise Student Success (PASS) Project is a longitudinal mixed methods study that focuses on how to improve academic and psychosocial experiences and outcomes for low-income students, many of whom are also first-generation college students and racially minoritized. The first stage of the project (2015-2020) focused on exploring the experiences of students in the Thompson Scholars Learning Communities (TSLC), which is a set of programming designed to offer comprehensive academic, personal, and social support services at three midwestern state university campuses. The second stage of the project (2021-2026) focuses on understanding the experiences of at-promise students who received TSLC support as well as those who did not. One key study focus was on at-promise college student career development experiences in their third, fourth, and fifth years of college. This portion of PASS included one-on-one, semi-structured interviews with 200+ at-promise college students to understand their various career related experiences and how they shaped their confidence in their academic and career pathways (i.e., their major and career self-efficacy). Analysis of these data included both deductive and inductive coding to capture experiential factors in various career related activities to explain their connection to major and career self-efficacy. Findings from this analysis form the basis of this brief. This study is further supported by prolonged engagement with campus staff, administrators, faculty, and students over the course of a decade, including interviews with educators and campus observations that further sensitized researchers to the university campus contexts.

This brief is based on findings by the research team members of the PASS Project. Authors listed on the suggested citation contributed to the development of the ideas presented in this brief. We are indebted to the educators, practitioners, and other stakeholders who collaborated with us through the PASS project. For more information about the PASS Project, please visit pass.pullias.usc.edu.

Suggested Citation:

Kitchen, J.A. & Katsumoto, S. (2026). *Designing Effective Career Support for At-Promise Postsecondary Students*. Pullias Center for Higher Education, University of Southern California.

Notes

¹ Kitchen, J., & Katsumoto, S. (In Press). Promoting career self-efficacy among low-income college students: A mixed methods examination. *New Directions for Higher Education*.

² Kitchen, J., & Hallett, R. (In Press). Re-imagining approaches to low-income college students' career development: Centering relationships in career support. *Change*.

³ Bettencourt, G. M., Corwin, Z. B., Kezar, A., Kitchen, J., Estes, H., Hallett, R., & Perez, R. (2021). *Tailoring programs to support student success* [Brief]. USC Pullias Center for Higher Education.

⁴ Kitchen, J., Kezar, A., & Hypolite, L. (2023). At-promise college student major and career self-efficacy ecology model. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, 16(3), 369–383.