PASS

Promoting At-Promise Student Success

USC Rossier
Pullias Center for Higher Education

Exploring Professionalism with At-promise College Students

TOPIC

Postsecondary educators play an important role in preparing students for careers after graduation. Colleges and universities generally offer career preparation resources that can be particularly important for at-promise students (e.g., low-income, racially minoritized and/or first-generation college students) who may be seeking upward economic mobility with fulfilling career trajectories that offer salaries and benefits. Students often seek guidance from educators about how to access and succeed in their pursuit of these career paths.

Many support programs for at-promise college students include resources related to understanding the concept of professionalism and performing certain actions deemed as professional, including etiquette dinners, mock interviews, resume workshops, and guides for dress and interaction with future employers. The goal of developing resources related to professionalism is to provide at-promise students with the knowledge, skills, and practice needed to successfully transition to their career of choice. College support programs often incorporate a focus on professionalism in an effort to ensure at-promise students have equal access to hidden rules about dress, language, and behaviors, which may be a particularly important consideration for students who may not have familiarity with dominant/corporate workplace expectations.

While these resources and programming are often created by equity-minded educators who want to support at-promise students, the design and implementation of professionalism supports can often center and reinforce dominant ways of knowing and being that may uphold White, middle-class and masculine perceptions of workplace contexts. In this brief, we draw from lessons learned through the Promoting At-promise Student Success (PASS) Project to explore how to design and implement professionalism programming for at-promise students in ways that illuminate the hidden rules of workplace culture while affirming the assets of students and their communities in order to have a more holistic perspective of professional identity.

DEFINITIONS

At-promise college students[1] refers to students marginalized by the education system broadly, with a particular focus on low-income students, first-generation college students, and racially minoritized students. Our use of at-promise aligns with prior scholarship that challenges deficit language and centers the strengths, assets, and potential of minoritized students.[2] At-promise emphasizes the responsibility of educational systems to address inequality through their commitment to minoritized groups (i.e., "the promise") as complex and interlocking phenomena that affect individuals beyond any one identity group.[3]

A universally agreed-upon definition of ***professionalism*** does not exist in research or practice. However, professionalism is generally considered to be socially constructed – defined and shaped by the beliefs and behaviors of dominant culture. We define *professionalism* as the perceived appearance, language, skills, values, and ways of acting that individuals are expected to perform in order to gain access to and succeed in employment settings.[4] Understandings of professionalism are generally rooted in White, middle-class, cisgender, and masculine ways of being, which tend to exclude or marginalize those individuals with different identities and experiences.[5]

OVERVIEW OF STUDY

The below takeaways and recommendations derive from a study of the Thompson Scholars Learning Communities (TSLC), a set of comprehensive college transition programs providing at-promise students with a suite of wrap-around academic, personal, and social support services. TSLC students participate in two years of structured programming and receive a scholarship that covers the cost of tuition and fees in the University of Nebraska system. The program operates at three different types of campuses—a metropolitan university, a rural regional campus, and a research one institution. Our mixed methods study explored whether, how, and why the programs develop key psychosocial outcomes critical for college student success such as sense of belonging, mattering, and major and career self-efficacy. Qualitative data were gathered through longitudinal interviews with TSLC students and selected interviews with staff, instructors, and stakeholders, as well as through program observations and document analyses. Quantitative data were gathered through longitudinal surveys of students, including TSLC participants and students with similar characteristics who did not participate in TSLC. Key takeaways are informed by analyses of qualitiative and quantitative data; recommendations are informed by reflections on lessons learned through the study in conjunction with participating University of Nebraska practitioners' insights on practice.

1 Bettencourt, G. M., Irwin, L. N., Todorova, R., Hallett, R. E., & Corwin, Z. B. (2023). The possibilities and precautions of using the designation "at-promise" in higher education research. *Journal of Postsecondary Student Success, 2*(2), 16-29.

2 Cheese, M., & Vines, J. (2017). The importance of support networks for at-promise students. *Journal of Research Initiatives, 3*(1), 1–11.; Ford, D. Y., & Harris, J. J. (1991). Black students: "at promise" not "at risk" for giftedness. *Journal of Human Behavior and Learning, 7*(2), 21–29.; Swadener, E. B. (1990). Children and families "at risk:" Etiology, critique, and alternative paradigms. *The Journal of Educational Foundations, 4*(4), 17–39.

3 Bettencourt, G. M., Irwin, L. N., Todorova, R., Hallett, R. E., & Corwin, Z. B. (2023). The possibilities and precautions of using the designation "at-promise" in higher education research. *Journal of Postsecondary Student Success, 2*(2), 16-29.

4 Evetts, J. (2003). The construction of professionalism in new and existing occupational contexts: Promoting and facilitating occupational change. *The International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy, 23*(4/5), 22–35.; Cooper, E. B. (2019). The appearance of professionalism. *Florida Law Review, 71*, 1–63.

5 Gray, A. (2019, June 4). The bias of 'professionalism' standards. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*. https://ssir.org/articles/entry/the_bias_of_profe ssionalism_standards#; Hodgson, D. (2005). "Putting on a professional performance": Performativity, subversion and project management. *Organization, 12*(1), 51–68.; Rios, C. (2015, Feb 15). You call it professionalism: I call it oppression in a three-piece suit. *Everyday Feminism*. https://everydayfeminism.com/ 2015/02/professionalism-and-oppression/; Perez, R. J., Bettencourt, G. M., Hypolite, L. I., & Hallett, R. E. (2023). The tensions of teaching low-income students to perform professionalism. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Prior to redisigning their professionalism activities, TSLC's approach to preparing students for career opportunities relied on traditional norms and approaches. Understanding limitations (see below) led programs to reflect on how to better serve students through their career prepartion activities and approaches (see p. 4).

1. ***Professionalism training and support generally reflected norms aligned with a narrow group of careers, which contributed to assumptions about career hierarchies.*** The majority of printed resources, professional panels, and informational seminars offered by the TSLC programs focused on business, law, medicine and similar fields. In addition, the support provided assumed that students would pursue elite and competitive internships, positions, and graduate programs within these fields. Students in other fields (e.g., education, social work, and agriculture) had a difficult time understanding how the guidance applied to their goals. In addition, these careers often centered certain geographical locations (e.g., big cities) with more corporate culture, which ignored many students' desires to return to their communities that may be rural or suburban.

2. ***Some students perceived professionalism as competitive and that requiring sacrifice to achieve; other students asserted a communal approach to career preparation.*** Professionalism seminars often focused on preparing at-promise students to compete with other students under the assumption that they would pursue a finite number of elite positions or graduate school spots. However, there were also ways that students resisted these norms or pushed back on expectations of competition and sacrifice. Some students spoke about a more communal approach to success that involved collaborating with friends, classmates, and community members in order to experience shared success. Relatedly, students pursuing less competitive fields that required collaborative approaches to work (e.g., social work, education) had a difficult time understanding if or how to enact a competitive mindset.

3. ***Professionalism training tended to focus on learned behaviors, rigid formulas, and socially constructed rules, and short-term transitions to the workforce.*** Specific events designed to train students how to enact professionalism (e.g., etiquette dinners, mock interviews and resume workshops) focused on learning and practicing behaviors that students needed to understand to achieve career success. Students were often given handouts with specific rules about what to wear, how to act, and what to say in order to meet professional expectations. Students were encouraged to buy certain types of clothes, which could create financial stress as well as to conform to certain expectations that contradicted one's individual style or cultural standards. Formulas for career success were presented as universal and often reinforced hegemonic expectations for professional behavior that were rooted in racism, sexism, cissexism, classism and other forms of inequity. Students felt they had to mute their personalities, attributes, cultural values, and previous experiences to learn behaviors associated with professional success. Furthermore, lessons focused on preparing to be hired and tended to ignore how to prepare for success after being hired.

4. ***At-promise students benefitted from learning about the hidden messages and/or expectations embedded in "professionalism" as they prepared for and transitioned to their chosen work contexts and career paths.*** Receiving transparent information can reduce anxiety and uncertainty since employers often assumed that students knew the invisible rules and expectations. Students benefited from activities that helped them achieve their career goals, such as writing a resume, pursuing an internship, job shadowing, preparing for an interview, and reflecting on personal goals related to their career paths.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- ***Help students identify examples of professionalism in their home communities to build upon their prior knowledge, rather than framing career development as detached from one's background.*** Instead of assuming professional behaviors only exist within middle and high income contexts, educators can engage students in discussions that name aspects of professionalism in their home and community contexts. Students can explore how to transfer these qualities and behaviors to their professional goals. A more holistic orientation towards professionalism can also help students who may be interested in a wide arrange of careers across geographic locations make connections between professional expectations and their career goals.
- ***Expand traditional notions of professionalism to include leadership and community support.*** Educators can help redefine notions of professionalism by centering their training in asset-based knowledge and experiences. For example, as students develop leadership skills, practitioners can encourage them to pursue careers that foster their passions to make a difference in the world, and become informed and engaged citizens. These asset-based and community-driven definitions of success were more aligned with students' experiences and goals. Furthermore, educators should be encouraged to re-examine their own perceptions of professionalism by reflecting on how they learned about professionalism and why.
- ***Teach different types of professionalism depending upon field, context, and student goals.*** Some students will be interested in pursuing careers in elite and competitive fields, such as business, law and medicine. They may benefit from professionalism resources and seminars related to navigating these contexts. For students in other fields, a more context-specific discussion of professionalism is warranted. In cases where separate training is not possible, students may benefit from explicit discussion about how workplace norms may vary by industry.
- ***Provide students with opportunities to draw upon their knowledge and experiences to plan for how they might engage if they encounter challenging circumstances related to professionalism expectations.*** Students might encounter a situation where a workplace definition of professionalism conflicts with one's identity, values, and/or needs. For example, a requirement to wear muted tones could clash with someone's cultural identity and self-expression. Educators can name the classist, racist, and ableist norms embedded within professionalism and allow for discussion about how students may actively resist and promote change. Alternatively, educators could help students process why employers have established workplace norms. Students may benefit from guidance about what specific contexts may expect in terms of dress or behaviors; however, educators should engage in critical reflections about why those rules exist and explain that there are professional spaces in more career fields that do not rigidly adhere to these rules. Educators may also want to engage in critical reflection about how they learned professionalism, how they benefited from it, and how they may have been constrained during their professional career. Programs can create opportunities for students to critically think about how to negotiate that tension if it arises. Do they wear muted colors or not? Why or why not? What are the consequences of either? How might they advocate for themselves in these scenarios?

EXAMPLE FROM PRACTICE

At the University of Nebraska at Kearney (UNK), the research findings have helped the Thompson Scholars Learning Community (TSLC) staff to reflect on and adjust how we teach professionalism to scholars. Our original career pathway content was being delivered with the purpose of preparing scholars for their future—the findings helped us to recognize we often taught skills from a narrow and rigid perspective.

We have intentionally changed our use of wording from "professional" to "career-ready." As we engage with our scholars, we clarify that the language we use is purposeful since practicing professionalism can feel inauthentic or performative. During TSLC programs across the academic year, we acknowledge the assets scholars bring to becoming career ready, such as their lived experiences with professionals in their communities, their motivation to learn academic content, and their confidence in their pathways based on career-related experiences and mentoring. UNK TSLC staff share current events with scholars related to the concepts of perceived professionalism and engage in discussions about inequities in the workplace; this time for reflection empowers the scholars to anticipate unjust barriers and recognize the choices they have in selecting work environments.

- Jen Harvey, Director of UNK's TSLC Program

QUESTIONS TO GUIDE PRACTICE

- How did you come to your understanding of professionalism? What aspects of professionalism helped you advance in your career? What aspects of professionalism expanded or constrained your identity and/or career trajectory?
- Given the students you serve, how could you support them in identifying aspects of professionalism in their family and home communities? In what ways could you help them to think about transferring those skills and perspectives to their future career paths?
- How does your programming approach professionalism? How do students with minoritized identities and diverse career goals equitably benefit from your activities and discussions?
- In what ways could alumni support your efforts to share professionalism knowledge and strategies with your students?

This brief is based on analysis by the research team members of the Promoting At-promise Student Success (PASS). Researchers are indebted to the University of Nebraska students and pracititioners who participated in data collection and reflected on analysis. For more information about the PASS project please visit the project website: pass.pullias.usc.edu.

Suggested citation

Hallett, R. E., Bettencourt, G. M., Corwin, Z. B., Harvey, J., Kitchen, J. A., Hypolite, L. & Perez, R. J. (2023). *Exploring professionalism with at-promise college students* [Brief]. USC Pullias Center for Higher Education.