



Promoting At-Promise Student Success

Leveraging Professional Learning Communities as a Mechanism to Spread New Ideas

The [Promoting At-promise Student Success](#) (PASS) Project is a longitudinal mixed methods research-to-practice partnership with three University of Nebraska (NU) campuses. During the first stage of the project, we identified the concept of Ecological Validation (EV) to explain why and how at-promise students experienced academic and psychosocial success in a comprehensive college transition program. The second stage of the project included developing cross-functional learning communities on each of the campuses to explore how to leverage the concept of EV to create broader institutional change in the hopes of improving outcomes for all at-promise students.

One key goal of a cross-functional Professional Learning Community (PLC) is to spread the learning that occurs within the group more broadly so that eventually, institutional culture change can occur through the adoption of new practices and policies implemented across units. While new information can be distributed informally, as we observed in our work with three campuses in the University of Nebraska (NU) system, it can also happen formally. Here we profile the various formal ways we saw the PLCs spread information about EV that can be used by other PLCs in the future.

Preparation for Sharing Learning

Prior to spreading the learning, the PLCs first engaged in several activities that helped PLC members prepare for the spreading strategies described below.

- **Mapping Spheres of Influence**

PLC members mapped their individual and collective spheres of influence, which included both a personal and team social network map. They also developed a list of activities and programs aimed to support at-promise student success on their campuses to better understand the organizational landscape. This process enabled them to understand who the group was connected with, as well as where gaps existed.

- **Convening Working Groups**

In addition to episodic events like summits or trainings, PLC members created a few working groups that were dedicated to keeping EV language and practice at the forefront of campus operations. One such working group focused on communications. They examined all communications that were aimed at first-year students to identify whether they reflected EV or could be modified to better reflect that approach. These on-going working groups provided a reminder to units, groups and individuals to continue exploring and modifying practices to reflect EV.

- **Planning Who to Invite**

The PLC members recognized that some individuals would be more open to exploring how to shift practices to reflect ecological validation than others. They began by inviting individuals within their networks who demonstrated openness to new ideas. After engaging with these individuals and groups, the PLC members then broadened their reach to bring in others.

- ***Creating Materials for Campus***

Our research project has multiple materials available to support practitioner learning related to EV, and the PLC members often drew from those resources to create campus-specific materials. When they presented to groups, they wanted to contextualize the concepts by adding campus data, mission statements and other details that framed why and how the EV approach mattered to the campus. They often also identified a specific challenge that the campus could address as well as developing activities that they felt would work for their campus. The PLC members practiced their presentations within the group to ensure they would be able to effectively communicate what they had learned. Participants valued graphics as a tool to illustrate concepts.

- ***Tailoring Communications and Messaging***

The PLC participants recognized they needed to tailor language for different groups on campus so that their messaging would resonate. For example, faculty might be focused on what EV looks like in the classrooms and want more information about the research that supports EV; while staff want communications that speak more to advising and might be more practical in orientation. In addition, some groups were more convinced by quantitative data while others would be more persuaded by student stories. Tailoring communications was an important tactic that helped the PLCs spread their learning.

- ***Aligning Efforts Strategically***

Campuses looked for ways to align the EV work with other campus priorities to better integrate and institutionalize the work. For example, one campus saw how the EV focus on student success aligned with goals in their accreditation activities. As a result, this campus began to explore how EV could be deployed in service of these existing accreditation goals. The process of strategic alignment enabled the PLC members to demonstrate that the training they developed was meaningful, which was key in recruiting people to engage with the concepts.

Strategies for Spreading Learning

- ***Campus-wide Professional Development Summits***

One of the main ways that PLCs spread information was through the creation of campus-wide summits (half-day or day-long) aimed at helping faculty, staff, and administrators across various units to learn about EV concepts and to mirror the cross-functional work they had done at a more micro-level within the PLCs. The PLC groups planned the events and utilized materials created in their PLC that had been particularly helpful in promoting learning EV concepts (link to artifacts, video, etc.). They carefully crafted an engaging agenda for the summit with activities that brought their colleagues together in cross-functional groups. Particularly compelling were panels of students who told stories about the challenges they experienced navigating college life as well as the value of approaches informed by EV. In addition to sharing ideas, the summits included hands-on activities to ensure people understood the concepts (e.g., stimulating dialogue in response to student vignettes) and developing action steps to encourage individuals who attended the session to implement what they had learned. The summit experience was particularly useful when entire units attended a session together.

- ***Follow-up Training Sessions and Meetings***

PLC members offered to meet with individual units after the summits to engage more individuals across units. Follow-up sessions mirrored the summits but were generally shorter and more targeted on the specific context of the individual unit. They utilized many of the same materials and offered them for use within these units as they conducted their own professional development or orientation of new colleagues. The follow-up trainings were often integrated into regular staff meetings so as not to create an additional burden—this also meant that individuals who may not

be inclined to attend an optional training got the opportunity to learn. PLC members also offered to attend leadership gatherings across campus (i.e., of department chairs, deans and the chancellor's cabinet). In addition to sharing what they learned with leaders, these meetings enabled the PLC members to explore and clearly articulate how their ideas connected with key leadership priorities. The process also ensured that leaders were aware of the PLC work, which often led to leadership creating additional opportunities for the members to share their learning.

- ***Online Video Trainings and Meetings***

In addition to in-person summits and follow-up meeting with units, the PLCs hosted online sessions aimed at people who may not be able to attend the in-person trainings. These online video meetings created a flexible and informal space, which could also be recorded and shared more broadly. These online meetings were particularly useful for individuals who may be the first in their unit to express interest and wanted to gather insights to bring back to their team. In addition, some individuals who previously attended an in-person event found that a follow-up online training gave them a chance to revisit ideas and deepen their understanding. The flexibility and informality of the online resources allowed faculty or staff to join in and listen over lunch.

- ***Website***

A key mechanism to support follow-up from the summits and provide a permanent home for EV knowledge were campus-based websites with resources that could be used to describe the concepts and were accessible to practitioners in the form of short briefs, rubric and checklists. These websites created an on-going presence and provided materials to anyone interested. The website also offered follow-up training opportunities for individuals or units interested in exploring the ideas in greater depth.

- ***Job Descriptions and Onboarding New Employees***

PLC participants recognized that new employees frequently join the campus and will need to be oriented to EV. Orienting new faculty, staff and leaders to EV early in their transition would lay a foundation for how they could approach their new role in ways that supports student success. PLC members encouraged units to add EV to job descriptions, interviews and new employee orientations. They provided examples for units to use.

- ***Newsletters, Articles, Documents and Slides***

As most campuses already have internal newsletters and communication vehicles, PLC participants developed short communications pieces that could be integrated into these existing mechanisms. They also created short briefs or one-pagers that could be shared in staff meetings. Some units wanted to host their own event or present EV on their own to their employees, so the PLC group also made slides available for individuals who wanted this option. The PLC members also leveraged the resources available on our website, which enabled them to argue that EV is a research-informed approach to improving student experiences and outcomes.

- ***Promotional Materials***

PLC members found that creating buttons, posters, bookmarks and other materials was also an effective way to spread EV concepts. Individuals who attended trainings often had these artifacts in their office as a reminder, which also allowed them to share what they learned when people asked questions. The materials were often branded to reflect the campus colors, logos, name and mission. One of the campuses also created a short two-minute video that demonstrated the concepts of EV, which could be used as a starting point for a conversation within units. The PLC members also said that these promotional materials helped make the concepts fun and engaging.

- **Campus Partnerships**

There were certain units that offered to be partners in the work and proved critical in spreading EV. Groups engaged with the PLCs included:

- The Center for Teaching Excellence was well-positioned to spread ideas to new and current faculty through orientation, optional trainings, newsletters and individual mentoring.
- The Student Success Hub (i.e., one-stop shop) integrated EV into ongoing training within their regular meetings and strategic planning.
- The advising council included EV in their semester training and orientation of new advisors.
- The first-year seminar team leveraged EV to develop materials and ongoing training for class instructors and peer mentors.
- Leadership groups (e.g., dean of students and vice chancellor of academic affairs) integrated training within their leadership meetings, which also empowered the unit leaders within these groups to be equipped to take what they learned back to their units.

The above examples are not the only groups on campus who can successfully engage people in learning about EV, but are examples of EV partners we worked with. Of key importance when strategizing about how to spread learning, is to broadly consider potential partners across the campus.

- **Training**

The PLC offered sessions for individuals who showed interest in EV and were willing to act as trainers or mentors to others within their units. The materials created for the summit were made available to individuals willing to play this role. As aforementioned, the PLC members developed multiple resources that individuals trained on EV could use when sharing concepts in their units.

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