

PASS

Promoting At-Promise Student Success

Issue #4 — November 2025

One of the highlights of our team's professional year is meeting up with Thompson Scholar Learning Community practitioners to share emerging research findings and learn from their deep expertise. Our meeting last June was no exception. We discussed emerging analyses about the effects of TSLC programs on student success and worked with each campus on how to spread the concept of ecological validation.



Well-being and Thriving for At-promise Students

Well-being can have a profound impact on students' ability to learn and persist in higher education. For low-income students, the cost of going to college can impact student experiences and obligations in ways that do not necessarily impact their higher income peers. Over the past year, the PASS team explored student well-being and thriving in depth. We are excited to share selected findings in a new brief (below), highlighting four key principles that have guided our thinking on well-being. These principles include considering well-being as holistic, ecological, part of a spectrum, and changing over time.



PASS
Promoting At-Promise Student Success

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Expanding Understandings of Well-being in Higher Education Settings

Topic/Issue

Over the past decade, postsecondary practitioners and leaders have asserted a growing concern over the well-being of their students. Many institutions have launched efforts to foster student well-being, underscoring its value to student learning, persistence, and holistic development. While these efforts are important, challenges and barriers continue to persist. At-prime students—students from low income areas, students of color, and students with disabilities—experience additional systemic barriers—such as racism and classism—that further affect their well-being. When considering how to support student well-being, it is important to remember that well-being is a complex concept that moves beyond a sole focus on individuals to ones that recognize the social, institutional, and ecological factors shaping student experiences—an orientation that is consistent with the PASS project. In this brief, we share four principles that inform our thinking; this brief summarizes several of the activities and resources we have developed to support well-being and offers recommendations for practice.

This practitioner brief is intended to highlight the importance of well-being for student success in higher education and to explain how we have approached understanding well-being in multi-faceted ways.

When exploring well-being, we are guided by four interrelated principles:

- **Well-being is complex and varied.** Well-being involves multiple dimensions such as (but not limited to): cultural, emotional, environmental, financial, intellectual, physical, spiritual, and social. A multi-faceted understanding of well-being moves beyond a mental health orientation to considering student well-being in its entirety.
- **Ecological factors impact well-being.** Postsecondary students experience well-being in institutional, societal, familial, and communal contexts. These contexts—well-being is often influenced—positively and negatively. The relationships and interactions within these contexts—such as programs, policies, and practices—have the potential to support (or hinder) student well-being.
- **Well-being is dynamic.** Most students experience well-being (or lack thereof) differently over time, with fluctuations in well-being occurring throughout the day, week, semester, or school year. These fluctuations are natural and often serve as a catalyst to growth. Thus, it is important to seek to understand and support student well-being throughout their college experience, rather than thinking well-being has to be “achieved” at any one point.
- **States of well-being can vary significantly.** Any student can experience a spectrum of well-being, ranging from health crises to thriving. Programs are encouraged to foster and acknowledge moments of growth and opportunity as well as recognize when interventions are needed.

¹Practitioner Brief
²World Health Organization

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Read the Well-being Brief

The [Expanding Understandings of Well-being in Higher Education Settings](#) brief also shares key takeaways from our research and recommendations for practice. This brief focuses on activities positively and negatively affecting student well-being, cultivating financial well-being for low-income college students, and the role that family and culture plays in how immigrant and refugee students experience well-being.

In this newsletter, you'll also read insights about nurturing student and staff well-being from Dusen D. Crichton, one of our wonderful practitioner partners at the University of Nebraska, Omaha. We also describe a new webpage that houses a series of vignettes designed to provide a meaningful way for practitioners to engage with student experiences when strategizing about improving student support. Additionally, the Pullias Center hosted a national webinar where we shared findings from the Professional Learning Communities facet of the PASS project. Below please find a link to the webinar recording where the perspectives of Melissa Burke (UNO), Amy Goodburn (UNL), and Jennifer Harvey (UNK) are highlighted. Finally, we have included the PASS project's well-being and thriving publications at the end of this newsletter, as well as links to our most recent project publications.

We appreciate your support and the work you do for students in higher education.



Ralitsa Todorova, on behalf of the PASS Project Team
Senior Postdoctoral Scholar



A PRACTITIONER'S PERSPECTIVE

By Dusen D. Crichton, Ph.D.,
Director, Thompson Learning Community

Over the past decade, we have sought to learn from our campus partners about how University of Nebraska campuses are supporting postsecondary student success. In an effort to learn about how programs are nurturing student and practitioner well-being, we turned to **Dusten Crichton**, Director of the Thompson Learning Community at the University of Nebraska, Omaha — one of the largest and most successful learning communities of its kind. Below please find Dusten's responses to questions about well-being and thriving posed by PASS Principal Investigator, Zoë Corwin.

Dusten's personal background as an emancipated minor and ward of the court has driven his passion for advocating for at-promise students in higher education. In addition to his professional role, Dusten is a father of two teenage boys and a mentor and coach to many. He takes his responsibilities as a father and role model seriously, understanding the profound impact that positive role modeling can have on young people, a lesson he values greatly in his own life.

Corwin: Was there an element of the TLC program that you felt was particularly effective in supporting student well-being last year?

Crichton: The element that supports student well-being the most in the TLC is our way of engaging students. We try to treat students more as peers who have choice and who have made the choice to engage with us in their academic journey. We believe they are capable of making the right decisions for themselves, and we want them to be able to use our program as a resource for their journey.

Corwin: How do you know when a student is thriving? And how does the TLC attempt to foster thriving?

Crichton: We often recognize that a student is thriving when they engage openly, when they show up consistently, make eye contact, smile, initiate conversations and feel comfortable around others. To foster this kind of thriving, the TLC focuses on building structured opportunities for connection. This includes “requiring” check-ins with staff and peer mentors, enrolling students in designated class sections, and hosting community-building events like dinners. However, if they are not meeting the “requirements” we don’t beat them down or try to make them feel bad. We see their absence for what it is, and what it tells us — that we have work to do to find ways to help the student see the value of the “requirements.” Ultimately, we’ve found that getting students into shared spaces with mentors, faculty and peers is a key first step, and once they’re there, we work hard to show them they matter and that we genuinely care about their success.

Corwin: Is there a practice or approach that has been helpful in supporting the well-being of TLC staff/faculty?

Crichton: Similar to how we support students, we create space for staff to show up authentically, make decisions freely, and feel safe being themselves. I aim to foster a culture where team members know they can ask for help or resources, and that I'll do what I can to support them. We build this culture by being approachable, transparent about our own humanity, and committed to collaborating through the challenges we face in both our work and our lives.

VIGNETTES



The PASS research team recently released a [series of vignettes](#) for practitioners who seek to improve their student success practices. The vignettes are designed to center student voices without burdening students in retelling their stories.

The vignettes are short, descriptive scenarios that highlight challenges students may face in college. Faculty, staff, and administrators often rely on student insights to guide changes to campus policies and practices. However, inviting students to participate in professional development sessions is not always feasible or appropriate. Vignettes offer an alternative: they preserve the authenticity of student voices while protecting privacy and reducing emotional labor.

Our research found vignettes to be a powerful tool for stimulating meaningful dialogue and reflection across institutional roles. Whether used in formal workshops or informal team meetings, vignettes support educators in identifying areas for growth, advancing equity, and reimagining how they respond to student needs. We worked with our campus partners to solicit themes for the vignettes. Many of the vignettes are informed by real practitioner-student exchanges or derive from situations that were documented in student interview data.

Each vignette begins with a purpose statement, followed by a scenario based on common student experiences, and concludes with guiding questions. Please feel free to download the vignettes to stimulate dialogue with your colleagues. You're also welcome to adapt them according to your needs — or create your own!

Foci of **vignettes** include —

- *Student with a Learning Disability Needs Assistance*
- *Disconnected Upper-Level Student Wants Advice*
- *First-Generation College Student Balances Family Crises and Coursework*
- *Upper Division Student Doubts Major Choice After Struggling to Find an Internship*
- *Student Parent Navigates Child Care & Academic Demands*
- *Overwhelmed Senior Navigates External Pressures*
- *Student Struggles to Balance Family and College Expectations*
- *Student Nears Graduation Without Clear Career Path*
- *Student with a Short-Term Disability Warrants Support*
- *Second-Year Student Has Not Fully Connected with Campus and Career Resources*
- *Student Balancing Family and Community Priorities Seeks Guidance*
- *Working Student Taking Mostly Online Classes Requires Advice*
- *Student Feels Uncomfortable Accessing Counseling Services*
- *Average Student Makes Mistake that Could Impact Career*



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**Hosted by: The Pullias Center's
Promoting At-promise Student Success Project Team**

Webinar: Building Impactful Professional Learning Communities in Higher Education to Support Student Success

This webinar features key findings from our three-year study involving professional learning communities (PLCs) designed to support at-promise students in postsecondary settings. Of particular interest, three University of Nebraska PLC participants join us to discuss their experiences and share lessons learned throughout.

[**Watch Recording**](#)

Recent PASS Publications

Direct links are provided to each publication. If you are unable to access these publications please contact [**Christine Rocha**](#) for a pdf copy.

- Bettencourt, G. M., Kezar, A., Hypolite, L. I., & Hallett, R. E. (2025). [**A matter of time \(use\): Conceptualizing time navigation and time equity as directions for equitable research.**](#) *Educational Researcher*.
- Bowman, N. A., Irwin, L. N., & Katsumoto, S. (2025). [**It was a good day? Time use and subjective well-being among lower-income college students.**](#) *The Journal of Higher Education*.
- Bowman, N. A., Irwin, L. N., Katsumoto, S., Tennessen, N. F., & Todorova, R. (2024). [**Differences and similarities in time use and well-being among female and male undergraduates.**](#) *Innovative Higher Education*.
- Bowman, N. A., Katsumoto, S., Bettencourt, G. M., Kitchen, J. A., & Irwin, L. N. (2025). [**Using subjective and objective social class measures in research, assessment, and practice.**](#) *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*.
- Bravo, S., Kitchen, J. A., & Corwin, Z. B. (2025). [**Latin* college students' major and career self-efficacy: A familial and community cultural wealth analysis.**](#) *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*.
- Holcombe, E., Hallett, R. E., & Kezar, A. (2025). [**Leveraging incremental transformation to create and support large-scale institutional change.**](#) *Academic Leader*.
- Kezar, A., Hallett, R. E., Corwin, Z. B., Hypolite, L. I., & Nagbe, M. N. (2025). [**Professional learning communities and institutional culture change in higher education: Facilitators to learning ecological validation to support historically marginalized students.**](#) *Journal of Postsecondary Student Success*.
- Kitchen, J. A., Culver, K. C., Rivera, G., & Corwin, Z. B. (2025). [**Promoting low-income college student success through peer mentoring: A mixed methods examination.**](#) *Teachers College Record*.

- Lauderdale, K., Todorova, R., & Corwin, Z. (2025). **Complicating understandings of low-income students' financial stress and well-being in order to inform institutional support.** *Journal of Student Financial Aid*.
- Perez, R. J., Hypolite, L. I., Bettencourt, G. M., & Hallett, R. E. (2025). **How the game is played: Low-income students' experiences with career development programming.** *Journal of Postsecondary Student Success*.
- Perez, R. J., Bettencourt, G. M., Hypolite, L. I., & Hallett, R. E. (2024). **The tensions of teaching low-income students to perform professionalism.** *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*.

Resources for Professional Learning Communities

- **Challenges to expanding and spreading the work of professional learning communities**
- **Developing a summit or professional development event**
- **Developing shared leadership within professional learning communities for transformational change aimed at at-promise student success**
- **Ecological validation reflection tool_Unit**
- **Ecological validation reflection tool for educators_Individual**
- **Facilitating learning in professional learning communities designed to promote at-promise student success**
- **How professional learning communities overcome the knowing-doing gap**
- **Improving Communications to At-promise Students: A Validating Approach-Activity**
- **Leveraging professional learning communities as a mechanism to spread new ideas**
- **Reflection tool—Sustaining the work of the coordinating group**

Recent PASS Conference Presentations

American College Personnel Association (ACPA)

- *Crafting Sustainable Careers as Graduate Students and New Professionals*
- *“Like a Puzzle”: Immigrant and Refugee Students Navigating Well-being*
- *Which College Success Programs Promote Prosocial Outcomes for Lower-income Students?*

American Educational Research Association

- *Beyond the Usual Suspects: A Random Forest Analysis of Precollege Predictors*
- *College Sense of Belonging: A Support Typology for Low-income Students*
- *Leveraging Cross-functional Professional Development Opportunities for Higher Education Organizational Change: Knowledge Transfer through Actor-Networks*
- *Low-income and Working-class College Student Career Development Experiences: A Descriptive Analysis*
- *Role of Cross-functional Professional Learning Communities to Improve Equitable Student Outcomes*
- *Understanding the Nexus of Well-being, Class, and Postsecondary Education for Low-income Students*
- *What Types of College Success Programs Work for Lower-income Students?*

Annual Conference on the First-Year Experience

- *Building Validating Relationships with Students—Personal and Ecological Approaches (w/ Jennifer Harvey and Aaron Estes)*

- *From a Professional Learning Community (PLC) to Campus Culture Change (w/ Toni Hill and Aaron Estes)*
- *Time Use and Well-being Among Low-income First-generation, and Racially Minoritized College Students (w/ Jen Harvey and Julie Campell)*

Central Association for Advisors for the Health Professions Annual Conference

- *Research-informed Approaches to Advising and Supporting Low-income, Racially Minoritized, and First-generation College Students*

Michigan Pre-College Conference

- *Creating Cultures of Care: Using the Ecological Validation Model to Promote Student Success*

Nebraska Career Education Conference

- *Research-informed Approaches to Advising and Career Preparation*

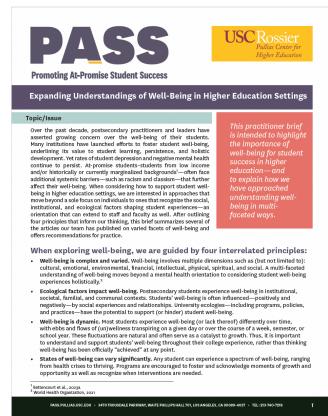
Nebraska Stakeholder Meetings

- *Bolstering Major, Career, and Professionalism Support for At-promise Students*
- *First-Year Seminars (FYS): Promising Practice to Improve Student Experiences and Retention Rates*
- *Improving Student-facing Communications: Audits, Checklists & Validating Approaches*
- *Launching Professional Learning Communities for Student Success*
- *Promoting At-Promise Student Success (PASS) Project Key Findings*

USC Rossier Research Symposium

- *Promoting At-promise Student Success: Insights from a Decade-long Mixed Methods Research-Practice Partnership*
- *Student Perspectives on What They Need to Thrive in Higher Education*

Recent PASS Briefs



Read this New Practitioner Brief:

Expanding Understandings of Well-Being in Higher Education Settings

Read this New Practitioner Brief:

Understanding How Time Use in College Shapes At-promise Students' Well-being During the First-year Transition

Understanding how time use in college shapes at-promise students' well-being during the first-year transition**TOPIC/ISSUE**

Student well-being influences their college transition and affects their academic achievement, retention, and graduation.¹ Little research has been conducted on how time use in college shapes at-promise students' well-being during their college transition, despite the fact that the college transition is a critical period for at-promise students and their first-generation backgrounds make up a large share of college students.² This brief aims to address this gap in research. First, we define what time use is and how it relates to well-being (e.g., classes, income). Understanding how common college activities—such as studying, working, and socializing—shape at-promise students' well-being during their college transition is important for institutions to support student success. In this brief, we explore the link between at-promise students' college time use and well-being and provide recommendations to manage time use for equity.

DEFINITIONS

Time Use: How students spend their time day-to-day and what they spend their time on (e.g., academics, socializing, working).

Time Navigation: Time navigation acknowledges that at-promise students can experience limited agency over the amount of time they spend on certain activities due to constraints on time and the competing priorities of work, family, and school. This brief also highlights the role of systems and institutions in time navigation, acknowledging the role of systems and institutions in shaping how at-promise students maneuver their multiple constraints.

Well-being: The presence of positive emotions, interpersonal connections, and positive functioning, as well as the absence of ill-being. Well-being is multidimensional, considering the whole person and various dimensions (e.g., physical, spiritual, financial, social) along with an individual's relationship within their community, family, and networks.³

1. PASS RESEARCH BRIEF • 04/19/2020 • PASS RESEARCH BRIEF • 04/19/2020 • PASS RESEARCH BRIEF • 04/19/2020

PASS Website

Please visit our website for more information related to the PASS study.

[Visit our Website](#)

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The Promoting At-promise Student Success (PASS) project is a partnership between the USC Pullias Center for Higher Education, the University of Nebraska and the Susan Thompson Buffett Foundation.

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