

PASS

Promoting At-Promise Student Success

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Higher Education

HUBS OF INNOVATION TO SCALE CHANGES NEEDED TO SUPPORT AT PROMISE STUDENTS

MAY 2021

TOPIC/ISSUE

Nationally, thousands of campuses are wrestling with how to better serve their diverse student body. However, innovation has not been widespread. Our study explored a key strategy to scale innovations in support of at-promise student success—creating a hub of innovation. Hubs of innovation typically refer to smaller units that test an intervention and, if it works, scale it to the overall campus. Our study explored whether the Thompson Scholars Learning Communities (TSLC), a comprehensive college transition program (CCTP) offered at three campuses and designed to support at-promise students, can serve as a hub for innovation and how it might do so. We developed several important insights, including the ability of a hub to spread innovations, supportive mechanisms that can assist in knowledge transfer from the hub to the overall campus, and the ways these support mechanisms can overcome the isolation that typically plagues hubs and have long made them less successful models for innovation.

These lessons learned are particularly important for campus leaders who are working to scale support for at-promise students. Leaders are in a position to create hubs of innovation as well as the mechanisms that support the spread of innovations. The findings from the study are also important for faculty and staff working in these programs in order to develop mechanisms that will help scale the innovations created within their programs. In this brief we highlight the mechanisms that the campus created to spread their change.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

All of the campuses we studied had innovations that transferred from the program to the overall campus. This study demonstrates the potential for a program to serve as a hub and be an on-going incubator for change.

This brief is intended for university leaders looking for strategies to scale support for students. A key strategy to create institution-wide change in higher education is creating a hub for innovations, where ideas and initiatives can be explored. The TSLC study identified four main support mechanisms that helped the hubs of innovation to transfer knowledge: 1. partnerships with other units, 2. advisory boards, 3. staff and faculty meetings, and, 4. dean and department chair networks through a faculty coordinator.

DEFINITIONS

Comprehensive college transition programs (CCTPs)

Structured experiences that provide academic and social support for marginalized students during their transition into higher education. TSLC programs are one such example of a CCTP.

KEY TAKEAWAYS (CONT.)

- ➔ **Supporting students requires continuous evolution in support services.** One dilemma that many leaders note is that supporting diverse students is a dynamic challenge and not one where you can adopt one set of changes and be done.¹ The student body continues to evolve and finding an approach to change that allows for continuous innovation is important.
- ➔ **Identifying an approach that includes the buy-in of critical stakeholders is key.** Finding an approach to change that works within the environment of higher education that has been resistant to changes that support diverse students is crucial.² The hub approach described in this brief was not seen as top-down and was met with little resistance on these campuses. In keeping with the literature on change, a hub turned out to be a promising approach and, in this particular instance, overcame the problems that plagued earlier hubs where the innovations became isolated.³

RECOMMENDATIONS

Four main support mechanisms emerged that helped the hubs of innovation transfer knowledge: 1. partnerships with other units, 2. advisory boards, 3. staff and faculty meetings, and, 4. dean and department chair networks through a faculty coordinator.

- 1. Partnering with Other Units:** Partnerships between the program and other units across campus were instrumental in leading to innovation between the program and other areas of campus. These partnerships were originally formed to help support students in TSLC by curating connections between students and the various offices. Over time the partnerships have also been strong levers for innovation. Partnering with other offices formally or informally was a mechanism that allowed the innovations occurring in TSLC to spread to the right offices across campus. For example, strategies for supporting racially minoritized students are now communicated directly to the multicultural office, key knowledge and strategies to support refugee students or coaching techniques are spread to advising, and proactive advising approaches are shared with the TRIO office. The direct office partnerships create linkages that ensure innovative practices are placed within the spaces that are most likely to take up and spread the innovation. Further, the relationships TSLC staff form with other offices ensure that there is more receptivity to the innovations as TSLC program is seen as a trusted partner.
- 2. Advisory Board:** Campuses can utilize an advisory board to spread innovations. One campus in our study (the metropolitan campus) utilized an advisory board. The advisory board offered support for the program by providing a wide array of input and consultation from the wisdom of major experts across campus. The advisory board was made up of key staff/faculty and stakeholders of the program including senior administrators in academic and student affairs, student support offices including counseling, advising, multicultural affairs, career center, and key faculty. This integrating structure helped to counterbalance loosely coupled campus structures and facilitate policy spread. The structure of the advisory board not only helped information flow from TSLC to the larger campus, but also helped keep the program from being isolated from the rest of campus. Hubs are typically challenged to stay connected to their host organization. The advisory board very intentionally ensured that all major units of campus were aware of the work of the TSLC program and vice versa; the program was connected to changes and activities on the larger campus. This made it possible for the program to know when transferring knowledge might be appropriate in terms of opportunities, as well as times when other priorities would make the transfer of ideas too challenging.
- 3. Faculty and Staff Meetings:** The campuses set up joint faculty and staff meetings aimed at supporting students that also became brainstorming groups in support of program-level and institutional-level change. These groups met regularly to discuss their day-to-day practice of advising and mentoring and became a location for innovations to spread. Through these groups, challenges and issues that needed to be addressed often emerged that led to innovations. The joint faculty and staff meetings allowed for academic affairs and student affairs to stay more tightly connected at two of the three campuses. While the TSLC program is housed under the Provost, the innovations would have been unlikely to spread to departments and among academic affairs without these meetings that kept them connected to faculty at the local level. Additionally, many of the innovations from TSLC about student development and support are often siloed into student affairs on campuses.

These faculty and staff joint meetings meant that faculty who often are unaware of interventions, programs, and policies in student affairs were now routinely connected to these ideas and conversations. Conversely, student affairs practitioners learned about academic requirements, policies, and issues.

4. Dean and Department Chair Networks Through a Faculty Coordinator:

Campuses established a system for reaching out to deans and department chairs on an on-going basis. While a few department chairs were on the advisory committee at one campus, there were not enough to keep connected to all the academic departments. Each of the campuses had a faculty coordinator who worked with faculty in the program and who stayed connected with department chairs and deans. This coordinator played a pivotal role in making it possible for TSLC to have on-going reach with individual faculty,

departments, and schools/colleges. While this happened more episodically than the regular faculty and staff meetings, these intentional and structured connections with department chairs and deans became a source for spreading innovations in teaching and student support as well as awareness about the needs of at-promise students. At one campus, staff and faculty capitalized on departmental networks the most to spread innovations. Staff at another campus had on-going connections, but campus staff were not always intentional in their communications and efforts to spread the innovation to departments.

Armed with these strategies, campus leaders and faculty and staff that work with support programs can design mechanisms to help ensure that elevations that support at-promise students are more widely implemented and available to help improve student success.

QUESTIONS TO GUIDE PRACTICE

- What strategies and resources are currently available at your institution that can facilitate innovation?
- Can you identify key stakeholders that can help generate innovation and promote effective application across your campus?
- What systems and practices can be applied to help departments transfer knowledge and effective strategies to serve students?

STUDY OVERVIEW

We studied the Thompson Scholars Learning Communities (TSLC), a set of programs providing low-income students, many of whom are also first-generation college students and racially minoritized students (whom we refer to as 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 located at three very different types of campuses—a metropolitan college, 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 and academic self-efficacy. Qualitative data was gathered through longitudinal interviews with TSLC students, staff, instructors, and stakeholders, as well as through program observations and documents. Quantitative data was gathered through longitudinal surveys of students, including TSLC participants and students with similar characteristics who did not participate in TSLC, as well as administrative records.

This brief is based on findings by the research team members of the Promoting At-Promise Student Success (PASS) project and was prepared by Adrianna Kezar. Authors listed on the suggested citation contributed to the development of the ideas presented in this brief, and are listed alphabetically following the primary author(s) who drafted the brief. For more information about the PASS project please visit the project website: PASS.Pullias.USC.edu. The complete list of team members/co-authors can be found on the About page.

Recommend Citation:

Kezar, A., Perez, R., & Swanson, E. (2021). *Hubs of Innovation to scale changes needed to support At Promise Students* [Brief]. USC Pullias Center for Higher Education.

Notes

1 Kezar, A. (2013). *How colleges change: Understanding, leading, and enacting change*. Routledge.

2 Kezar, A. (2019). *Creating a diverse student success infrastructure*. USC Pullias Center for Higher Education.

3 Levine, A. (1980). *Why innovation fails*. SUNY Press.

4 Swadener, E.B. (1990). Children and families "At Risk:" Etiology, critique, and alternative paradigms. *The Journal of Educational Foundations*, 4(4), 17-39.