

# PASS

Promoting At-Promise Student Success

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Higher Education*

## CREATING A CONTEXT FOR AT-PROMISE STUDENTS TO THRIVE: RELATING PSYCHOSOCIAL AND ACADEMIC OUTCOMES

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### TOPIC/ISSUE

Many discussions about higher education are often narrowly framed around questions of economics—will students earn more if they get a college degree? Is it worth it to take out student loans? However, students and the people supporting them in their college journey have broader goals for their educational experience. The decision to attend college is often driven by the desire for a higher income and social mobility, but it is also grounded in the belief that college offers the opportunity to build deep, meaningful connections with others, engage in a process of self-discovery, and a validation of individual strengths and opportunities. Further, as a public good, higher education has the potential to not only improve individuals' wellbeing, but also to improve society in both tangible and intangible ways, whether through higher economic output as a result of a more skilled workforce, greater civic participation, or reduced costs for mental health services.<sup>1</sup> A postsecondary experience should be a pathway not just to economic benefits, but provide opportunities for student thriving and flourishing.<sup>2</sup>

Our work studying the Thompson Scholars Learning Communities (TSLC) sheds light on the extent to which postsecondary interventions can improve these types of psychosocial outcomes, as well as the relationships among psychosocial outcomes and academic achievement. Specifically, we look at how participating in TSLC builds students' sense of belonging, mattering, social self-efficacy, and academic self-efficacy, and how these outcomes relate to each other as well as to students' GPA and persistence. All four of these psychosocial outcomes help create a context for individual thriving, defined by researcher Laurie Schreiner<sup>3</sup> as students who are academically engaged and efficacious, with a generally positive and proactive outlook on life, who feel connected to others, including those from different backgrounds, and who want to contribute to the broader world. Throughout, we argue that psychosocial and academic outcomes represent distinct but overlapping domains of student success, and that institutions need to support both to promote students' overall wellbeing.

*This brief is intended to inform university system leaders and policymakers about the importance of psychosocial outcomes (sense of belonging, mattering, and self-efficacy) for students' overall wellbeing and mental health, as well as the connection between psychosocial outcomes and academic success. We offer concrete recommendations for how to support institutional and programmatic efforts that allow students to thrive.*

### DEFINITIONS

**Sense of Belonging** is the extent to which students feel connected to a group, accepted by their peers, and that they are an integral part of the campus community.

**Mattering** is the extent to which students perceive themselves to be valued as an individual and that others care about their personal wellbeing and success.

**Academic self-efficacy** is the extent to which a student feels they can succeed academically.

**Social self-efficacy** is the extent to which a student feels they can navigate social interactions successfully.

**Persistence** measures whether a student is continuously enrolled in the University of Nebraska system.

**Cumulative GPA** is a student's cumulative grade point average, as recorded by the University of Nebraska system.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

➔ **Participating in TSLC leads to large and significant increases in students' feelings of mattering and sense of belonging while students are in the program.** TSLC provides an example of how a program serving undergraduate students can improve the psychosocial outcomes that lay the foundation for individual thriving. Our experimental evaluation of TSLC found that students who participated in TSLC reported significantly and substantially higher levels of both mattering and sense of belonging than did non-TSLC, scholarship-only recipients.<sup>4</sup> By providing students with comprehensive academic, personal, and social support, programs and institutions can empower students to find community on campus and convey the message that students are valued.

➔ **Our work highlights the interconnectedness of students' psychosocial outcomes.**

The four psychosocial constructs we examined (sense of belonging, mattering, academic self-efficacy, and social self-efficacy) were correlated with each other over time, representing distinct but overlapping components of students' overall wellbeing. To promote student success, institutions need to focus on students' experiences while on campus. Specifically, institutions need to create structures that allow students to create connections with their peers, instructors, and campus staff. Institutions also need to ensure that the campus climate is welcoming and inclusive for all students.

➔ **Students' psychosocial wellbeing predicts their academic success.** Each of the four psychosocial outcomes examined were directly, significantly, and positively predictive of academic success throughout students' first six semesters (three years) on campus.<sup>5</sup> Students who reported higher feelings of belongingness, mattering, academic self-efficacy, and social self-efficacy also earned higher grades. For example, a student enrolled in a full load was likely to earn about one letter grade higher in one of their courses (e.g. a B instead of a C in one of four courses) if they reported higher levels of any psychosocial construct. Students who reported higher levels of psychosocial wellbeing were also more likely to stay enrolled through their first six semesters. Reporting stronger feelings of belongingness, mattering, academic self-efficacy, or social self-efficacy increased students' likelihood of returning to campus for an additional year. For example, 87 percent of students in our sample persisted into a second year; this increased to 94 percent for students whose first-year reported sense of belonging was in the top quartile of all reported belonging scores.

➔ **Our work underscores how critical it is for institutions and policymakers to prioritize creating contexts in which students are empowered to live full, rewarding lives.** Students' psychosocial outcomes are critical measures in and of themselves of student wellbeing that create a context for human flourishing. They are also potential intermediate outcomes institutions can leverage to help students succeed academically and persist at higher rates, as called for in most performance-based funding plans.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

When students enroll in college, they do so with a set of hopes and expectations for the future. Institutions that support students not just in earning a degree or finding a job, but in developing key psychosocial outcomes can act as a launchpad for students' thriving and flourishing as individuals. By providing an array of support services that address students' academic, personal, and social needs within a validating context, institutions can become engines of true transformation. To move towards this goal, we recommend the following steps:

**1. Collect information regularly about students' psychosocial progress.** Annual or semester surveys sent to students that assess their feelings of belonging, mattering, social self-efficacy,

and academic self-efficacy can provide valuable information about students' wellbeing and mental health. These data can not only serve as an early indicator of future academic success and persistence, but also give valuable feedback about whether more work is needed to support students' overall wellbeing and success.

**2. Provide adequate resources to programs supporting students' psychosocial outcomes.** Higher education systems are likely facing a budget crisis in the 2021-22 academic year and beyond as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic and resulting recession. In times of fiscal austerity, there is often an urge to "focus only on the essentials," often

meaning a narrow set of academic services. However, students' mental health and wellbeing are also essential, both from a humanistic and practical perspective—students tend to do better academically when they're also doing well psychosocially. Institutions and states should continue to fund and elevate programs (such as TSLC) on their campuses supporting students' psychosocial success

- 3. Invest in comprehensive programs rather than programs with a narrow range of activities.** Our work suggests that programs providing comprehensive support promote student success broadly. Narrowly focused programs that only provide one service and that do not allow students to bring their full selves or address students' complex, intersecting challenges may not be as successful in promoting students' academic or psychosocial outcomes.

## QUESTIONS TO GUIDE PRACTICE

- What infrastructure (e.g. programs, policies, staff, and funding) is currently in place on campuses to support students' psychosocial wellbeing?
- How are campuses assessing students' wellbeing?
- What resources or accountability measures are in place to ensure campuses are prioritizing students' mental health?

## 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 Elise Swanson. 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](https://PASS.Pullias.USC.edu). The complete list of team members/co-authors can be found on the About page.*

### Recommended Citation

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Oreopoulos, P. & Salvanes, K. (2011). Priceless: The nonpecuniary benefits of schooling. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 25(1), 159-184.

<sup>2</sup> Brighouse, H., Ladd, H., Loeb, S., & Swift, A. (2018). *Educational goods: Values, evidence, and decision-making*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.; Schreiner, L. (2013). Thriving in college. *New Directions for Student Services*, 143, 41- 52.

<sup>3</sup> Schreiner, L. (2010). The "thriving quotient": A new vision for student success. *About Campus*, 15(2), 2-10.

<sup>4</sup> Melguizo, T., Martorell, F., Swanson, E., Chi, E., Park, E., & Kezar, A. (2019). *The effects of a comprehensive college transition program on psychosocial factors associated with success in college*. (EdWorkingPaper: 19-158). Retrieved from Annenberg Institute at Brown University: <https://doi.org/10.26300/840r-9948>