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.

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, through higher economic output as a result of a more skilled workforce, greater civic participation, or reduced costs for mental health services.

A postsecondary experience should be a pathway not just to economic benefits, but provide opportunities for student thriving and flourishing.

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 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.
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. The complete list of team members/co-authors can be found on the About page.

### Recommended Citation


### Notes