

PASS

Promoting At-Promise Student Success

USC Rossier
Pullias Center for
Higher Education

ENGAGING AT-PROMISE STUDENTS FOR SUCCESS THROUGH INNOVATIVE PRACTICES: PROACTIVE ADVISING AND SHARED ACADEMIC COURSES

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This brief is intended for university leaders, faculty, and academic affairs professionals looking for practices that are particularly effective for supporting the success of at-promise students. We discuss two components of a comprehensive college transition program that exemplify how program structures and practices can reflect validating, identity-conscious approaches that promote students' engagement, psychosocial wellbeing, and academic achievement.

TOPIC/ISSUE

There has been a steady increase in enrollment of students whom we refer to as at-promise students¹ (i.e., low-income students, many of whom are also first-generation college students and racially minoritized students) in higher education.² Thus, there is a need for evidence-based practices to better serve this student population. As our ecology of validation brief³ describes, it matters more how educators support students than what types of interventions get created. However, we have identified several program components that not only reflect the use of validating approaches but also offer examples of structures and practices that support the success of at-promise students. Practices related to advanced career and major self-efficacy are described in a separate brief. In this brief, we focus on two effective program components: proactive advising as part of mid-term meetings and shared academic courses, including a writing course designed around autobiography.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

➔ **When staff proactively reach out to students utilizing a holistic and non-deficit model, students feel validated, benefitting their academic self-efficacy:** Proactive advising, a preferred term for “intrusive advising,” is a preemptive advising intervention where staff meet with students throughout the semester to review their progress in courses, ideally in time to help students make any changes needed. It extends beyond course and major selections by including improvement strategies, referrals to student services, and addressing non-academic factors.⁴ Thompson Scholars Learning Communities (TSLC; see detailed below) applies a holistic and non-deficit-oriented model, such that all students regardless of prior or current

DEFINITIONS

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

Psychological well-being is the extent to which a student feels a sense of belonging and mattering, including perceptions that they are valued as an individual and that they are welcomed on campus, as well as having academic and social self-efficacy, believing they can achieve academically and navigate social interaction successfully.”

Validation is a process through which institutional agents—faculty, staff, and peers—show interest in students' academic success and personal wellbeing.¹⁴ In this process, institutional agents take on the onus for student success and providing support by drawing on the assets, strengths, and capabilities that at-promise students possess. Validation theory centers how student support is delivered, rather than what support is delivered.

KEY TAKEAWAYS (CONT)

academic standing go through the proactive advising process. Students value the proactive academic validation and affirmation that they are capable learners from staff and instructors.⁵ We find that proactive advising benefits students' academic self-efficacy and is associated with students making changes to their academic behaviors (e.g. approaches to studying and use of academic resources).⁶

➔ **Mechanisms that make proactive advising effective.** The benefits of proactive advising occur because staff offer students structured opportunities for reflection and self-assessment of their academic performance and behaviors, which is not typically included as part of the advising process. Staff also provide strategic and instrumental guidance on academic behaviors that promote academic success and explore alternatives (e.g., identifying classes and majors that may be a better fit to students' interests). This approach places the onus on staff to assist students in building from their strengths and devise plans to achieve their academic goals. Throughout advising meetings, staff provide students with interpersonal and emotional support needed to help them succeed academically. Staff take a holistic approach to academic success whereby they acknowledge the personal is important and can affect one's academic success.

➔ **Implementing shared academic courses promotes similar levels of engagement among students from diverse backgrounds and is associated with their psychosocial wellbeing and academic achievement:**

As the learning community component of the TSLC, shared academic courses (SAC) reflect identity-conscious⁷ design through a loose-cohort structure where students choose among a number of courses each semester where enrollment is limited to TSLC students. One example SAC is *Autobio.*, a first-year writing course focused on autobiographical reading and writing that provides students opportunities for self-reflection and sensemaking while they develop writing effectiveness. Additionally, a faculty coordinator serves as a bridge between TSLC staff and shared course instructors, training instructors in effective pedagogies and the culture of TSLC. We find that SAC promotes similar academic engagement among students from different backgrounds and that engagement in SAC is positively associated with students' first-year psychological wellbeing, especially in terms of academic self-efficacy, as well as with cumulative GPA.⁸ We did not find similar results with another required program course, the first-year seminar. Unlike SAC, the first-year seminar addressed college-knowledge and was not grounded in an academic discipline, which may limit students' abilities to immediately apply lessons learned and connect them to academic outcomes.

➔ **Mechanisms that make shared academic courses effective.** The structure and practices of shared academic courses reflect identity-conscious design⁹ that promotes students' engagement and success. For instance, the loose-cohort learning community structure provides needed flexibility for students in terms of scheduling, academic preparation for college, and major pathways. Further, the faculty coordinator facilitates awareness of students' strengths and struggles among TSLC staff and instructors so that students can benefit from opportunities and resources in the classroom and on campus. *Autobio.* demonstrates several engaged pedagogies implemented in SAC that effectively support the learning and success of at-risk students: instructors intentionally build community in the classroom, assign culturally relevant texts, validate students' backgrounds and stories, offer students structured opportunities for reflection, and foster empathy and connection by encouraging students to share their narratives with peers.¹⁰

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. Design programs to have bridges across academic and student affairs to support student success.** The siloed nature of higher education creates gaps that can be difficult for students to traverse. Further, students are often made responsible for navigating complex institutional structures, which can be overwhelming. It makes more sense for institutional agents who are familiar with these structures to facilitate students' success in and out of the classroom. Proactive advising and the role of the faculty coordinator in SAC both provide examples of such bridges, but many other designs are possible.
- 2. Create program structures and practices that are grounded in your specific student population.** Educators can use institutional data and scholarship to identify the assets and needs of the students who participate in your program. For instance, while learning communities have been implemented widely, at-risk students may face challenges in scheduling when co-enrollment is required, as many students work and have family responsibilities; the loose-cohort structure of SAC avoids such challenges. Similarly, the non-deficit-oriented model of proactive advising makes academic reflection and guidance a norm, rather than singling out students who might be struggling academically. Such identity-conscious approaches incorporate students' identities in order to promote student success.¹¹
- 3. Encourage proactive advising with a holistic and asset-based approach.** Advisors can reach out to students to identify themselves as a resource, make them feel welcome, and check-in with them early in the semester, so that any challenges can be addressed. Advisors should apply a holistic approach to identify challenges and resources in and outside of students' college environment. Advisors should identify and build on students' assets and strengths when advising them to best identify resources and solutions to help them succeed.
- 4. Ground students' opportunities for building academic skills and peer relationships in disciplinary learning.** Courses like *Autobio.* provide opportunities for students to engage in sense-making about their previous experiences and connect with peers within the context of learning and developing writing skills. While many institutions have implemented first-year seminars as a means for academic skill-building and development of a peer community, students benefit more in terms of academic self-efficacy when these activities are integrated with intellectual exploration of disciplinary content.¹²
- 5. Use pedagogies that center students.** Beyond supporting students' mastery of course content, course activities inform their psychosocial well-being. Culturally responsive practices such as the use of culturally relevant texts reflect a collectivist orientation and help students to develop meaningful relationships.¹³ The student-centered pedagogies demonstrated in many shared courses, such as collaborative learning and experiential learning, can promote deeper learning by helping students to foster connections between their lived experiences and

QUESTIONS TO GUIDE PRACTICE

- What are the assets, strengths, and capabilities of the at-risk populations at your institution? How can these strengths be incorporated in the practices aimed at promoting student success?
- What programs already exist on campus to support these students? To what degree do they reflect design and practices that are conscious of students' multiple identities?
- To what degree do educators incorporate a holistic approach to help students achieve academic success and personal wellbeing? What channels of communication exist to support student success across the institution? How can these channels be expanded? To what degree do these channels promote a holistic understanding of 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 were gathered through longitudinal interviews with TSLC students, staff, instructors, and stakeholders, as well as through program observations and documents. Quantitative data were 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.

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Notes

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⁷ Pendakur, V. (2016). Introduction: Two distinct paths and a missed opportunity. In V. Pendakur, Ed., *Closing the opportunity gap: Identity-conscious strategies for retention and student success*, (pp. 1-9). Stylus Publishing.

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