



Promoting At-Promise Student Success through Ecological Validation

Joseph A. Kitchen and Zoë B. Corwin • March 14, 2022

Higher education often struggles to meet the needs of [at-promise students](#)—that is, those from low-income, first-generation, and racially minoritized backgrounds (Kitchen et al., 2021). Colleges and universities graduate students from these backgrounds at much lower rates than their peers despite myriad efforts over the decades to remedy these inequities (Cataldi et al., 2018; Shapiro et al., 2018; Tinto, 2012). The failures of colleges and universities to significantly improve at-promise student success in meaningful ways results from one-size-fits all approaches to student support, siloed and difficult-to-navigate campus environments, and deficit-oriented campus cultures where educators treat at-promise students and their needs as problems that need fixing to “fit the mold” of a successful college student.

Leaders in higher education continue to wrestle with these seemingly intractable disparities, and many have piloted novel models to support at-promise students as they navigate postsecondary education.

Working closely with practitioners from a large comprehensive college transition program that serves thousands of at-promise students at three University of Nebraska campuses, researchers recently documented a new, evidence-based model for fostering at-promise student success called *ecological validation* (EV), which offers a new direction for higher education leaders interested in advancing equity and the success of a diverse student body (Kitchen et al., 2021). In the model, a key mechanism driving at-promise students' success is that practitioners across campus contexts (e.g., classes, advising, financial aid, student affairs) adopt a validating approach to how they interact with students. In this process, educators and staff (1) learn about students' backgrounds and experiences; (2) affirm who students are and the value of what they bring with them to college; (3) acknowledge that each student has what it takes to succeed academically and personally; and (4) recognize in both words and actions their potential for college success (Rendon & Muñoz, 2011). Practitioners and faculty who participate in EV coordinate campus support that is tailored to students and is responsive to their multifaceted needs and goals. Validating support from multiple educators over time immerses students in an environment that empowers to succeed and creates synergistic effects where the impact of validation is greater than any one validating interaction alone. Our research team found this approach to student support promotes students' success, including their sense of belonging, feelings of mattering, and confidence in their major and career paths (Hallett et al., 2020; Hypolite et al., 2020; Kitchen, 2021; Melguizo et al., 2021).

In the EV model, practitioners and educators

1. reach out to students proactively, learn about their backgrounds, and cultivate genuine, trusting relationships in which students feel comfortable sharing who they are, what their unmet needs are, and what they hope to achieve in college;
2. leverage the trusting relationships they have built to identify and anticipate the challenges students may encounter in college and to collaboratively identify students' short- and long-term goals as well as opportunities for students to realize those goals;
3. affirm that students have what it takes to overcome challenges and achieve their goals;
4. empower students to succeed by connecting them to campus support tailored to their unique identities, needs, and goals, where other educators continue to validate and encourage them; and
5. take a long view to students' success by maintaining a caring, trusting relationship with each student, periodically checking in to ensure that they receive the support they need, and encouraging them by communicating sincerely held beliefs in their capacity to succeed.

While higher education has a history of seeking out silver-bullet interventions and programming solutions to address disparities in at-promise student success, EV places emphasis on *how educators deliver support* and creating a culture where faculty and staff interact in validating, proactive ways with students and collaborate with their colleagues on support. An emphasis on process over any one intervention or program component (e.g. learning communities, first year seminars, mentoring programs) offers a promising direction forward for higher education. Our research suggests that processes such as validating students' capabilities for success and coordinating support to empower students can be learned

by educators across contexts and scaled up at colleges and universities to better serve at-risk students.

Higher education leaders play a central role in scaling this model at their colleges and universities. Below we outline several recommendations for implementing the EV model (Kezar et al., in press; Kitchen et al., 2021).

- **Incentivize efforts to engage in EV.** Incentives need to align with goals. Faculty, staff, and administrators are naturally inclined to focus their efforts on tasks that they will be evaluated on. To implement EV, educators need to spend time getting to know their students, building trusting relationships, meaningfully affirming their capabilities for success, and connecting them to campus support. For evaluation purposes, leadership should formally recognize and appropriately incentivize the time and physical and mental resources that engaging in this process requires. For instance, they could ask educators to include concrete examples in written reflections documenting their efforts to engage in EV; these reflections would then count toward tenure and promotion.
- **Coordinate communication and facilitate collaboration.** Create structures and enable lines of communication across different offices and campus units so educators can easily find and coordinate campus support. Encourage and model collaboration and more collective responsibility and accountability. The siloed structures of traditional campuses hinder educators' and practitioners' ability to connect students to the support they need. Leaders should promote collaboration across units and consider ways to reward offices that seek out collaboration to support at-risk students. Leadership might explore developing online dashboards where practitioners can enter keywords related to student needs and goals and identify the appropriate support offices to connect them to. E-advising systems also offer potential as they enable educators to track student needs and goals to facilitate information sharing across student support offices.
- **Facilitate learning about EV and rethink hiring practices and employee socialization.** Investing in the professional development of staff, administrators, and faculty from all sectors of campus is an important step in adopting practices related to EV. EV works because students are validated in multiple contexts and have their capabilities affirmed and reinforced over time. Many educators will need guidance on how to discover students' assets; build meaningful, genuine relationships; and validate students' backgrounds and capabilities. A developmental approach with scaffolded learning will be critical in creating a nonthreatening environment for educators to learn how to enact EV. Directors, managers, and faculty search committees should adjust hiring practices to ask interviewees about their approach to student support to ensure that they take an asset-oriented, validating approach—and new hires should be socialized to participate in EV.
- **Engage stakeholders in the implementation process to promote buy-in.** As a first step, working groups (either unit-specific or across units) might develop scenarios tailored to specific campus contexts (e.g., financial aid, faculty, counseling) to help campus stakeholders think through how to discover student assets and determine how they can leverage those assets to validate students and promote their success. To expand learning beyond the groups, campuses might consider creating learning communities that involve faculty and staff across units. They can integrate the scenarios from the working groups into activities (guided discussions, role-playing, etc.) that

illustrate how to be validating so educators can model their approach appropriately in their respective functional areas. Leaders can also identify educators on campus who exhibit the characteristics of a validating agent and ask them to talk about how they incorporate validation into their work to promote buy-in from within. It will be helpful to identify educators who work in similar or adjacent functional areas or disciplines to promote buy-in. Workshops should be incentivized (or required) because simply soliciting volunteers to attend workshops will likely only attract those who are already committed to at-promise student success and leave out those who would benefit most.

- **Capitalize on existing strengths.** Consider piloting EV in departments and functional areas on campus where the culture of student support already reflects asset-based and equity-oriented perspectives. Leverage these spaces to develop models relevant to your university context that other departments and functional areas on campus can use, illustrating that this process can work on your campus and enabling other educators who have not implemented the model to learn from the successes and challenges of those who have.
- **Emphasize process and collective action.** Encourage other leaders, deans, and directors of student affairs on your campus to shift their thinking away from silver-bullet program or intervention solutions. The focus on *how* to deliver student support will enable educators across contexts to be a part of the student success effort rather than restricting the responsibility for supporting at-promise student success to a few offices, programs, or interventions. It will also help facilitate development of a durable culture of EV (Kezar et al., in press).
- **Ensure asset-based messaging.** Words matter and can set the tone for how educators think about and approach at-promise student support. Leadership should make sure that the university communicates expectations around student success in asset-based terms. This may mean reviewing faculty handbooks, job descriptions and announcements, student affairs training documents, official university communications, university mission statements, and policy statements with a close eye toward changing deficit-oriented language and approaches to be more asset-based and validating.

For more information about the EV model and other promising practices identified in the *Promoting At-Promise Student Success* study, visit pass.pullias.usc.edu.

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