

Understanding how time use in college shapes at-promise students' well-being during the first-year transition

TOPIC/ISSUE

Students' well-being influences their college transition and affects their academic achievement, retention, and graduation.¹ Little research has documented how common college activities may shape at-promise students' well-being during their college transition, despite the fact that at-promise students (i.e. students from low-income, racially minoritized and/or first generation backgrounds) make up a large share of college-goers and face unique, compounding challenges that affect their well-being (e.g., classism, racism). Understanding how common college activities—such as attending class, studying/homework, working, and socializing—shape at-promise students' well-being during their college transition is crucial to inform practices and policies that support their success. In this brief, we explore the link between at-promise students' college experiences and well-being by focusing on how students spend and manage time. Several recommendations for equitably supporting at-promise students' well-being are offered.

This brief is intended for higher education practitioners and focuses on the impact that time commitments have on at-promise students' well-being as they transition to college. The role of programs and institutions in mitigating stressors related to time use are highlighted.

DEFINITIONS

Time Use: How students spend their time day-to-day and what they spend their time on (e.g., academics, socializing, working).

Time Navigation: Time navigation acknowledges that at-promise students can experience limited agency over the amount of time they spend on certain activities due to constraints on their time and the competing priorities and commitments they must navigate, including those outside of college. Time navigation acknowledges the role of systems and institutions in shaping how at-promise students maneuver their multiple competing time commitments and responsibilities.²

Well-being: The presence of positive emotions, interpersonal connections, and positive functioning, as well as the absence of ill-being. Well-being is multidimensional, considering the whole person and various dimensions (e.g., emotional, physical, financial), along with an individual's relationships within their community, family, and networks.³

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **Multiple time demands affect at-promise students' well-being.** At-promise students experience complex, interconnected challenges in college that shape their well-being, including competing time commitments (e.g., family responsibilities, working, classes), financial stressors, classism, racism, and unfamiliar college environments that also affect their sense of belonging and success.
- **Contextual factors influence at-promise students' time use and well-being.** Social, environmental, and systemic factors shape at-promise students' obligations (e.g., family/elder care, transportation needs, working for pay) and constrain agency over their time, with consequences for college success and well-being.
- **Academic activities, employment, and socializing significantly affect students' well-being.** Navigating and prioritizing the many competing time demands in college—such as class, employment, studying/homework—often leads to a more stressful and difficult experience when engaged in those activities. Time to socialize and relax supports at-promise students' well-being.
- **Reflection and meaning-making are powerful influences on students' well-being.** Opportunities for at-promise students to reflect on and make sense of their time use—including how college and personal responsibilities impact their time commitments and well-being—shape their college success. Reflection offers an opportunity to put their time commitments and college goals into perspective, develop realistic expectations, and recognize accomplishments (e.g., completing an assignment, dedicating several hours to studying) in ways that contribute to well-being.
- **Structure and routine shape students' well-being.** Developing an adaptable routine that works for students' unique circumstances and competing responsibilities supports students' navigation of time use in college and consequently their well-being. Identifying and prioritizing commitments and structuring time to accommodate obligations and goals—which includes ensuring time to socialize and relax even in the presence of various demands—promotes well-being. These routines must be flexible enough to accommodate at-promise students' evolving needs and circumstances.
- **Institutions play a pivotal role in students' well-being.** College educators, counselors, and student support program practitioners serve as critical guides who can help students navigate their time use, structure their routines, and engage in reflection and meaning-making to support at-promise students' well-being.
- **Sensitivity to at-promise students' circumstances is critical to effective support.** Efforts to aid students in developing time navigation strategies and to support their well-being should be sensitive to the unique time constraints at-promise students face due to other significant obligations, such as work or family responsibilities, in addition to academics. These efforts should be considered one part of a more comprehensive effort to support at-promise students' time navigation and well-being.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Incorporate structured time to reflect on time use and goals.** Students' well-being benefited from opportunities to reflect on their college goals, consider how their time use relates to their goals, and contextualize their goals and commitments (e.g., constraints on their time due to the need to work, family responsibilities, meeting basic needs). Reflection can include opportunities for educators to collaborate with students to identify a set of priorities, realistic goals, and a structure for students' time that works for their multiple competing needs and priorities.
2. **Incorporate opportunities to discuss time navigation, well-being, and accompanying support resources in existing spaces.** Classes, first-year seminars, orientations, college transition or summer programs, or advising meetings are prime opportunities to reach at-promise students and engage with them early about navigating competing time commitments and well-being during their college transition. Leveraging these existing spaces—rather than requiring them to attend a separate meeting, event, or activity—can reduce the number of time commitments for students who are already challenged by time constraints.
3. **Normalize the challenges of navigating time commitments during the college transition.** Educators should acknowledge that it is normal for students to experience challenges navigating multiple competing time commitments while they adjust to college. Doing so normalizes the difficult nature of this process so that students do not internalize their challenges as limitations on their time management capabilities, which would detract from their well-being. These messages should be paired with encouragement, support, and resources to aid students as they navigate their time and well-being during their college transition.
4. **Recognize students' accomplishments—big and small—and collaborate with students to set realistic academic expectations.** Many at-promise students in our study grappled with perfectionism and unrealistic expectations of themselves (e.g., dedicating significant time to studying and homework to earn perfect grades) that detracted from their well-being. Educators can model and encourage setting realistic academic expectations and acknowledge students' accomplishments. For instance, educators could start class by asking students to volunteer an accomplishment for that week such as completing a paper, attending a club meeting, or participating in a study group. Educators could also intentionally acknowledge student growth in course performance or class participation as an important indicator of success, for instance. Acknowledging the learning process over achieving perfect outcomes alleviates some stress associated with common college experiences, like studying or attending class.
5. **Aid students in navigating opportunities to support, nourish, and recharge their well-being.** Educators are in a position to connect students who are experiencing challenges navigating time commitments that affect their well-being to a network of campus resources. These resources may include counseling services, food pantries, emergency scholarships, financial aid offices, and student organizations. Opportunities to socialize with others often promoted students' well-being. Educators can alleviate the stress and challenge of navigating time use during the college transition by directing students to clubs, organizations, and events that resonate with students' interests and backgrounds and work for their busy schedules, including virtual events and activities that aid in building community. Educators can also facilitate opportunities for peer-to-peer sharing about effective time navigation strategies and support resources to facilitate the development of a supportive peer community that promotes well-being.

6. **Assist students in developing an adaptable routine to structure their time in college.** The general lack of a structured schedule in college contributed to students' stress and negative perceptions of their well-being. Educators can assist students in developing a routine that is adaptable and compatible with their unique set of circumstances, commitments, and goals. Calendaring and planning tools can be shared to aid in implementing the routine. Educators can discuss and model how to adapt routines when unexpected circumstances arise to prepare students to pivot when their situations change. Instructors are encouraged to be flexible and accommodating with assignment deadlines and recognize that students may have unexpected circumstances that create challenges navigating their multiple competing time commitments, such as sudden changes in their work schedule or family care emergencies.

QUESTIONS TO GUIDE PRACTICE

- What assumptions do you hold about at-promise students' time use, priorities, obligations, and strategies? How do the findings and recommendations presented in this brief compare to those assumptions?
- Given your role, how can you aid at-promise students as they navigate competing demands on their time, and their well-being during their college transition? What recommendations can you draw on to inform support in your functional area?
- What supports exist on your campus (e.g., transition programs, first year seminars, orientations, advising/counseling, classes) that might benefit from engaging with the recommendations outlined in this brief to enhance support for at-promise students?

STUDY OVERVIEW

The Promoting At-promise Student Success (PASS) research study began in 2015 as a partnership between the Susan T. Buffett Foundation (STBF), the University of Nebraska (NU) system, and a research team from the Pullias Center for Higher Education at the University of Southern California (USC). The goal of the study was to understand how the Thompson Scholars Learning Communities (TSLC) at the three University of Nebraska campuses (Kearney, Lincoln, and Omaha) impacted at-promise student success. The first phase of the study (PASS1), which ran from 2015-2020, generated a range of findings regarding how to best support at-promise college students. In 2021, the second phase of the study (PASS2) launched with an expanded focus beyond the TSLC programs. We continued to explore the outcomes examined in PASS1 (e.g., sense of belonging, mattering, validation) as well as new areas of interest (e.g., well-being, financial stress, and time navigation) for at-promise students both within and outside of the TSLC programs. The key takeaways and recommendations described in this brief reflect lessons learned through a mixed methods exploration of 273 interviews with 160 first-year, first-time, at-promise university students and 4,296 responses to individual time use surveys completed by 200 participants. More information about PASS can be found at pass.pullias.usc.edu.

This brief is based on findings by the research team members of the Promoting At-Promise Student Success (PASS) project. Authors listed on the suggested citation contributed to the development of ideas presented in this practice brief.

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Notes

¹ Arria, A. M. et al. (2013). Discontinuous college enrollment: Associations with substance use and mental health. *Psychiatric services*, 64(2), 165-172.; Duffy, A., et al. (2020). Predictors of mental health and academic outcomes in first-year university students. *BJPsych open*, 6(3), e46.; Eisenberg, D., Golberstein, E., & Hunt, J. B. (2009). Mental health and academic success in college. *The B.E. Journal of Economic Analysis & Policy*, 9(1), 40.; Harward, D.W. (2016). *Well-being essays and provocations: Significance and implications for higher education*. In D.W. Harward (Ed). *Well-being and higher education: A strategy for change and the realization of education's greater purposes* (3-20).

² Hypolite, L. Hallet, R., Kezar, A., Bettencourt, G. (2021). *At-promise students' experiences with time navigation: Insights from Comprehensive College Transition Program (CCTP) participants*. Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE) Annual Meeting. San Juan, Puerto Rico, November 3-6.

³ Diener, E. (2009). *Subjective well-being*. In E. Diener (Ed.), *The science of well-being* (pp. 11-58). Springer.; Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2001). On happiness and human potentials: A review of research on hedonic and eudaimonic well-being. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 52(1), 141-166.; World Health Organization. (2021). *Health Promotion Glossary of Terms*. <https://www.who.int/publications/item/9789240038349>