PASS

Promoting At-Promise Student Success

Considering College Students as "At-promise"

Educators recognize that some subgroups of students have inequitable access to information and resources conducive to postsecondary success. Institutions have begun to leverage data to identify these subgroups who may have lower academic outcomes. For example, many institutions find that low-income, racially minoritized, first-generation college and/or other student groups (e.g., LGBTQIA+; refugee, DACA and/or immigration status of student and/or family; first-generation college students; parenting and/or caregiving to children or adult family members; students with special needs; formerly incarcerated; homelessness, housing instability, and/ or food insecurity; formerly foster youth; transfer student; over 25 years old; and/or, employed 30+ hours per week) have lower retention or graduation rates as compared to other student groups.

Historically, these subgroups of students have been clustered under the categorization of at-risk. This framing identifies these students as experiencing challenges navigating postsecondary education which can result in lower rates of degree completion. Educators using the term at-risk are generally well-intentioned and try to advocate for different forms of support to encourage student success. Many of the efforts emerging from this approach focus on providing students with information to address gaps in knowledge through supplemental programs. One of the downsides is that this framing often focuses solely on the deficits of students without considering their assets or the institutional responsibility to adjust practices that undermine students' success.
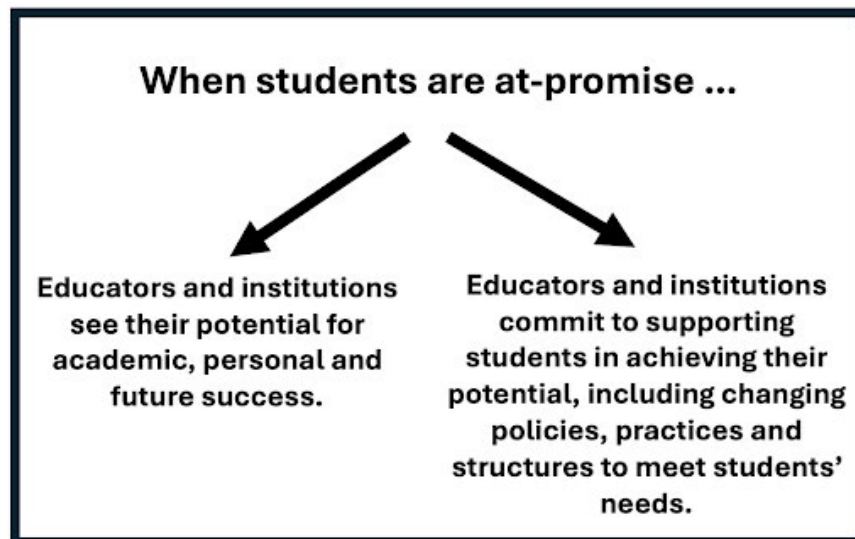
We join a group of scholars and educators who argue for a strengths-oriented approach to considering how to support these students by focusing on institutional gaps. In particular, we encourage scholars to use at-promise, which is a strengths-based way to refer to students facing societal barriers. The term at-promise has been used most frequently in K-12 settings (Rios & Mireles-Rios, 2019)[1]; however, it is gaining more prominence in higher education (Bettencourt, et. al., 2023; Kezar et al., 2020; Kezar et al., 2024)[2] as a way to leverage anti-deficit approaches to thinking about students within the broader context of educational inequities (Harper, 2010)[3].

An Approach, Not a Label

Marginalized students do not need more labels. The purpose of advocating for considering students as at-promise is to shape how educators think about students. The language we use frames how we think about students' potential, our responsibility to support them, and the forms of support that we provide. The term involves two aspects of promise (Bettencourt et al., 2023).

Seeing promise in students. Students have the potential to be successful in higher education and beyond when effectively supported. An at-promise approach requires educators to think holistically about students and not just look at the challenges that they may experience. The ways that educators think about supporting students from an at-promise approach shifts from only focusing on gaps in knowledge and moves toward also leveraging students' strengths, goals, and other assets.

Promising to support students. Instead of solely looking to fix at-promise students and address their challenges, educators also consider what aspects of the institution need to be fixed to encourage their success. With this orientation, educators and institutions commit (or promise) to provide students the support they need. This approach involves understanding how institutional structures, policies and practices play an important role in why students may have differing outcomes. Once the institutional barriers are identified, educators can commit to fixing these issues.

When students are at-promise …

Educators and institutions see their potential for academic, personal and future success.

Educators and institutions commit to supporting students in achieving their potential, including changing policies, practices and structures to meet students' needs.

For an example of how on university incorporated this language into their work, please review: *https://facultyacademy.ucmerced.edu/teaching-resources/supporting-risk-students*

For more in-depth discussion of the "at-promise" term, please see: *The possibilities and precautions of using the designation "at-promise" in higher education research.*

Endnotes

1   Rios, V. M., & Mireles-Rios, R. (2019). *My Teacher Believes in Me!: The Educator's Guide to At-promise Students*. Five Rivers Press.

2   Bettencourt, G. M., Irwin, L. N., Todorova, R., Hallett, R. E., & Corwin, Z. B. (2023). The possibilities and precautions of using the designation "at-promise" in higher education research. *Journal of Postsecondary Student Success, 2*(2), 16-29. ; Kezar, A., & Kitchen, J. A. (2020). Supporting first-generation, low-income, and underrepresented students' transitions to college through comprehensive and integrated programs. *American Behavioral Scientist, 64*(3), 223-229; Kezar, A., Hallett, R. E., Perez, R. J., & Kitchen, J. A. (2024). Scaling success for low-income, first-generation, and racially minoritized students through a culture of ecological validation. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education, 17*(2), 229-242

3   Harper, S. R. (2010). An anti-deficit achievement framework for research on students of color in STEM. *New directions for institutional research, 2010*(148), 63-74.

For more information about the PASS project, please visit our website. Please note that resources for practitioners are located here and materials related to Professional Learning Community can be found here.