

Considering College Students as “At-promise”

Educators recognize that some students have challenges accessing information, connections, and resources needed for postsecondary success. Institutions have begun to leverage data to identify which of their students have low academic outcomes in order to target support. Many institutions find that low-income students and other student groups (including but not limited to students who are first-generation college; parenting and/or caregiving to children or adult family members; homeless, housing unstable, and/or food insecure; former foster youth; transfer students; veterans; over 25 years old; and/or, employed 30+ hours per week) have lower retention or graduation rates as compared to the overall student body.

Often, these subgroups of students have been clustered under the category of *at-risk*. This framing identifies these students as experiencing challenges navigating postsecondary education which can result in lower rates of degree completion than their peers. Educators using the term *at-risk* are generally well-intentioned and 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 downside is that this framing often focuses solely on students’ deficits without considering their strengths 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 adjusting policies and practices to meet their needs. In particular, we encourage scholars to use *at-promise*, which is a strengths-based way to refer to students facing challenges. 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.

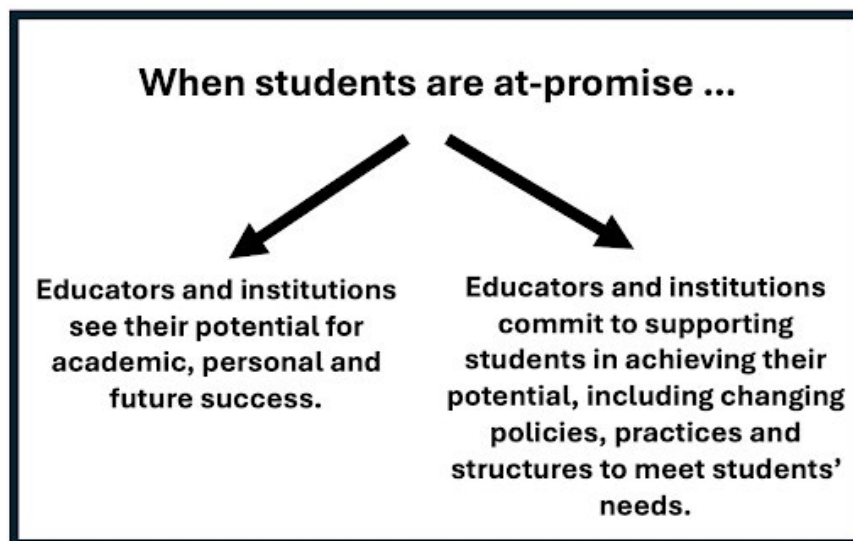
An Approach, Not a Label

Students do not need more labels. The purpose of advocating for considering students as at-promise is to shape how educators think about and work with students. The language we use frames how we think about students’ potential, our responsibility to support them, and the forms of support we provide. The term involves two aspects of promise:

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 away from primarily focusing on gaps in knowledge and moves toward leveraging students’ strengths, goals, and experiences to support their success.

Promising to support students. Instead of solely looking to fix 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 with 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.

While an *at-promise approach* to working with students can be particularly beneficial for student groups experiencing challenges, the shift in how educators approach their work can help *all* college students. Educators begin to shift how they think about their work with students to consider the potential each student possesses as well as the role of both the educator and institution to meet the needs of students.



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

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