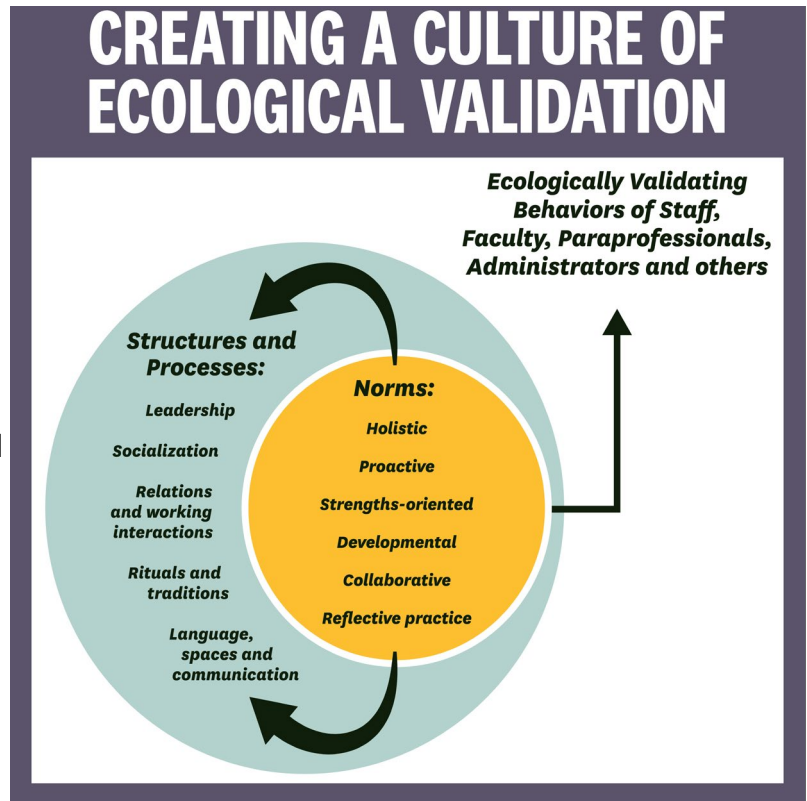# PASS

Promoting At-Promise Student Success

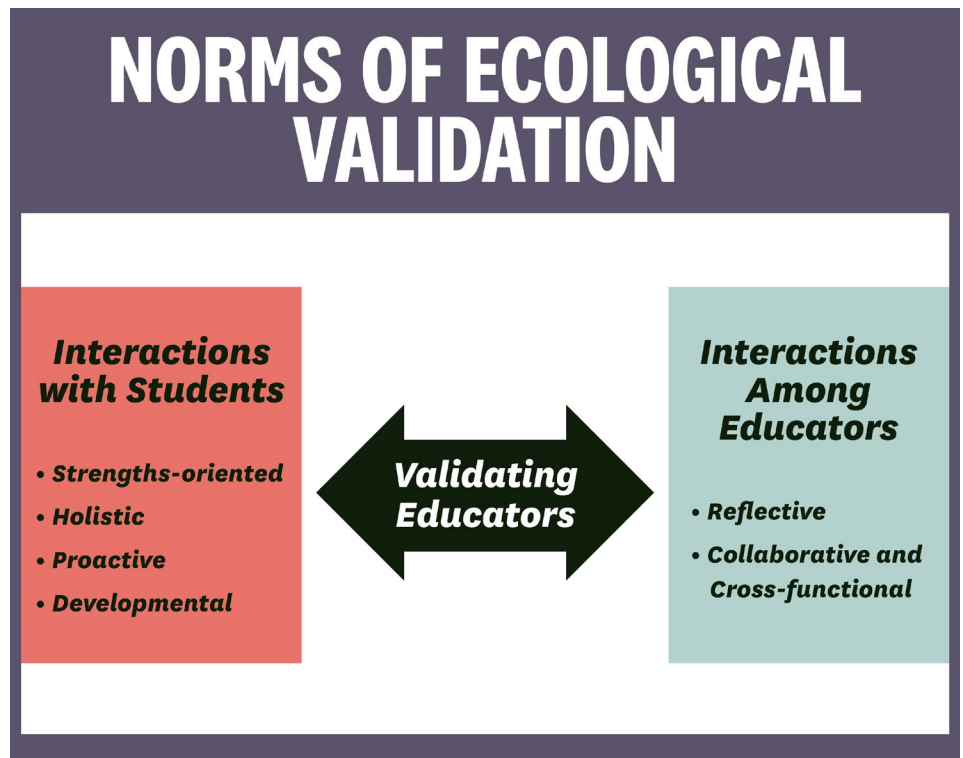## LEVERAGING ECOLOGICAL VALIDATION TO IMPROVE AT-PROMISE STUDENT EXPERIENCES AND OUTCOMES

Ecological validation is a research-based approach that emerged from the Promoting At-promise Student Success (PASS) Project, which was conducted in partnership with educators at three of the University of Nebraska campuses. Ecological validation is an approach to creating a postsecondary culture that centers the strengths, needs and experiences of at-promise students through the implementation of six norms: holistic, proactive, strengths-oriented, developmental, collaborative and reflexive practice. These norms shape the structures and processes (e.g., leadership, socialization, relations and working interactions, rituals and traditions, and language, spaces and communication) in ways that result in ecologically validating behaviors and practices of the staff, faculty, administrators, and other educators. Ecological validation moves away from the siloed approaches that exist in higher education and focuses on shifting institutional culture toward a more collaborative and cohesive approach to support at-promise student experiences and outcomes.

The norms and ideas framing ecological validation are not necessarily new in higher education; however, the approach focuses on being intentional about enacting all norms to embed a culture of ecological validation into current higher education structures. This framework involves a comprehensive approach to addressing the overarching structure of an institution instead of focusing on siloed and piecemeal attempts to address smaller problems. Ecological validation is an intentional and comprehensive approach that is best accomplished when cross-functional stakeholders (e.g., faculty, staff and administration) work together to review and revise policies, practices and structures across campus.

CREATING A CULTURE OF ECOLOGICAL VALIDATION

Ecologically Validating Behaviors of Staff, Faculty, Paraprofessionals, Administrators and others

Structures and Processes:
- Leadership
- Socialization
- Relations and working interactions
- Rituals and traditions
- Language, spaces and communication

Norms:
- Holistic
- Proactive
- Strengths-oriented
- Developmental
- Collaborative
- Reflective practice

While ecological validation may benefit subgroups of students who experience challenges in higher education (including those from low-income backgrounds or who are the first in their family to attend college), all students benefit when a college or university creates policies and practices that reflect ecological validation. For example, all students—even those with   parents who attended college—benefit when instructors or advisors use holistic, proactive, strengths-oriented, and developmental approaches to engage with them. Similarly, university systems become easier for all students to navigate when faculty, staff, and leaders work collaboratively across the units in higher education to improve student experiences and consistently reflect on how to improve their practice.

NORMS OF ECOLOGICAL VALIDATION

Interactions with Students

- *Strengths-oriented*
- *Holistic*
- *Proactive*
- *Developmental*

Validating Educators

Interactions Among Educators

- *Reflective*
- *Collaborative and Cross-functional*

Holistic: Considers all aspects of a student's background, identities, personality, and goals, as well as academic and interpersonal experiences in college when connecting them with resources and opportunities.

Proactive: Places the onus on institutional agents to regularly reach out to students to build relationships, address challenges, and identify opportunities.

Strengths-oriented: Focuses on the cultural assets, talents and skills, previous successes, and personality traits that students bring with them to campus rather than employing a deficit approach, which focuses primarily on the assumed challenges that at-promise college students may face.

Developmental: Involves supporting students throughout their educational journeys in a cohesive way from admission through graduation.

Collaborative: Explores ways to build connections across various campus services and programs to create integrated and reinforcing validating experiences across a student's ecology of experience, which requires cross functional work across departments, programs, support services and other aspects of academic and student affairs programming.

Reflective Practice: Involves continually considering how students, staff, and leadership experience initiatives to make shifts necessary to improve student success. This process uses both formal and informal data to inform decision-making.

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