How and Why a Comprehensive College Transition Program Works

Promoting At-Promise Students’ Success in the Thompson Scholars Learning Communities

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PURPOSE OF THIS BRIEF

As campus leaders, policymakers, instructors, and staff work to improve at-promise\(^1\) student outcomes, it is important to understand what type of support structures and practices are beneficial for students. Our work evaluating the Thompson Scholars Learning Communities (TSLC) sheds light on these questions.

TSLC is a two-year comprehensive college transition program with multiple program elements operating in the University of Nebraska (UN) system, at UN-Kearney, UN-Lincoln, and UN-Omaha. A team of researchers at the University of Southern California has been working since 2015 to understand whether, how, and why TSLC shapes psychosocial outcomes such as sense of belonging and forms of self-efficacy. Measures of psychosocial outcomes provide important information about students’ experiences on campus and the extent to which they encounter a welcoming, inclusive environment as well as students’ perceptions of themselves and their abilities as scholars. By providing information about students’ wellbeing, psychosocial outcomes represent a unique and critical outcome for students. Additionally, psychosocial outcomes are associated with academic outcomes such as grades and persistence. This brief uses quantitative methods to answer the how and, to a lesser extent, why questions of the evaluation. For more information about other findings, please see: https://pullias.edu/tlsc.

This brief focuses on how and why the program worked based on quantitative findings. Specifically, we examined students’ experiences in TSLC and how students’ experiences with individual program elements relate to their outcomes. This brief presents our main findings to date, using survey data collected from TSLC scholars between 2015 and 2019.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

1. The TSLC program provides equal opportunities for engagement for students from at-promise backgrounds by providing multiple, integrated program elements (e.g., shared academic courses, peer mentoring) while also connecting students to the larger campus. This is a crucial finding, as program engagement is positively associated with students’ psychosocial outcomes (e.g. sense of belonging, mattering, academic and social self-efficacy) in their first through third years.

\(^1\) At-promise students are less likely to attend a four-year college or university and those more likely to be marginalized at predominantly white, middle class institutions. “At-promise” is an asset-based term that recognizes students’ potential. Swadener, B. B., & Lubeck, S. (Eds.). (1995). *Children and families “at promise”: Deconstructing the discourse of risk*. SUNY Press.
2. The proactive support of TSLC staff and opportunities for peer interactions embedded in TSLC are consistently associated with higher psychosocial outcomes, even after controlling for students’ starting levels.

3. At each of the three campuses, the link between program engagement and students’ psychosocial outcomes is similar. As there are slight variations in program implementation at each campus, this finding suggests that campuses are customizing the TSLC program to meet the needs of their students and achieve similar outcomes.

4. Academic validation is a key link between students’ engagement and their sense of mattering to campus, as well as their academic achievement, as measured by GPA.

5. Major and career focused activities support the development of students’ major and career self-efficacy.

6. The strengths and areas for continued growth in TSLC offer clear advice for all programs and institutions designing and implementing college transition programs.

**KEY CONSTRUCTS IN OUR ANALYSES**

We examine relationships between engagement with TSLC and *psychosocial outcomes*:

- **Mattering**: the extent to which a person perceives themselves to be valued as an individual and that others care about their personal wellbeing and success.
- **Sense of belonging**: the extent to which students feel connected to a group, accepted by their peers, and that they are an integral part of the campus community.
- **Academic self-efficacy**: the extent to which a student feels they can succeed academically.
- **Social self-efficacy**: the extent to which a student feels they can successfully navigate social interactions.
- **Major and career self-efficacy**: the extent to which a student believes they are capable of successfully identifying and pursuing a suitable major and career path given their interests, skills, and experiences.

We also examine **one key lever** that may link engagement and outcomes:

- **Validation**: a proactive process of affirmation and recognition of students’ abilities as scholars and their diverse assets by institutional agents, including instructors and staff. Validation has two dimensions: academic and interpersonal. We examine academic validation, which focuses on recognition and support received from instructors.

Finally, we refer to **at-promise students**: • Students of color • First-generation students (neither parent has BA) • Lower income • Lower ACT scores • Lower high school GPA

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2 All students in our sample are low-income, with an EFC below $10,000. Additionally, students in our sample are generally high achieving, with an average high school GPA of 3.5 (minimum 2.0) and an average ACT score of 22.6
**PROGRAM ELEMENTS AND HOW WE ASSESS THEM**

TSLC is a multifaceted program that includes comprehensive support:

- **Dedicated staff**: Full-time staff who work with students. We assess students’ perceptions of care and support from TSLC staff.
- **Shared academic courses**: General education courses taught by TSLC instructors. We assess students’ levels of engagement in the TSLC-only shared academic courses.
- **First-year seminar**: A course taught by TSLC staff to build academic skills and create community. We assess students’ levels of engagement in the first-year seminar.
- **Proactive advising**: A mid-semester intervention to provide academic assessment and guidance. We assess students’ reported change in academic behavior following advising from TSLC staff.
- **Peer mentors and leaders**: TSLC alumni serve as peer mentors and course assistants, leading in and out of the classroom. We assess students’ levels of engagement with their TSLC peer mentors.
- **Instructors**: Selected instructors who teach TSLC courses. We assess the frequency of students’ course-related and non-course-related interactions with the instructors who TSLC-only shared academic courses.
- **Peers**: TSLC provides many opportunities for academic and social interactions among peers. We assess the frequency of students’ academic and social interactions with TSLC peers.
- **Academic, social, and career support**: Events planned by program staff that build skills and foster community. We do not examine participation in these TSLC-only events directly.
- **Shared housing/space**: Dedicated dormitories, study spaces, or offices that facilitate socializing, studying, and community events. We do not examine shared spaces provided by TSLC directly.

**TSLC SUCCESSFULLY ENGAGES STUDENTS FROM DIVERSE BACKGROUNDS IN MULTIPLE PROGRAM ELEMENTS WHILE CONNECTING THEM TO THE LARGER CAMPUS**

We examine whether there are any systematic differences in students’ engagement with TSLC based on their background characteristics, including race/ethnicity, sex, first-generation status, high school GPA, ACT score, family income, and campus. Our measures of engagement include aspects such as how well staff helped students deal with personal problems, how often students asked questions in shared academic courses, and how close they were with their peer mentor. **We do not find any meaningful differences in students’ engagement with TSLC across groups.**

While there are a few statistically significant differences, they are not large or persistent. In other words, TSLC is doing a good job of reaching out to all students, regardless of their background, and empowering them to engage meaningfully in TSLC. These are very significant findings because few programs are able to serve students from very different backgrounds (minimum 11). We identify students as lower income, having lower ACT scores, and having lower high school GPAs within this truncated range.
successfully. These findings are crucial for a program that serves a large and diverse group of students.

**TSLC is empowering students from all backgrounds to engage meaningfully in the program**

While students in TSLC have access to extensive program resources and must complete a number of TSLC requirements, **program participation generally does not limit students’ engagement in other parts of campus.** In their first year, TSLC students report slightly higher levels of engagement with campus services (academic, health, and student services offices) compared to non-TSLC students; the two groups report similar levels of engagement with campus services in their second and third years. TSLC students also report similar engagement in several co-curricular experiences (fraternities/sororities, student organizations, and religious organizations) across their first three years. However, TSLC students report less frequent participation in athletics and honors compared to non-TSLC students, likely as a result from the time and curricular requirements of program participation. The similar levels of campus engagement are important as the program is designed to supplement, rather than duplicate, existing campus services. In addition, students’ engagement on the larger campus may help them transition out of the program.

**PROACTIVE SUPPORT FROM TSLC STAFF AND STRUCTURED OPPORTUNITIES FOR PEER INTERACTIONS ARE CONSISTENTLY ASSOCIATED WITH HIGHER PSYCHOSOCIAL OUTCOMES**

We explored how students’ engagement with program elements relate to their psychosocial outcomes. As there is overlap in TSLC program elements, we account for students’ engagement with all program elements simultaneously. These results, summarized in Table 1, indicate which program elements are related to student outcomes when considering the program as a whole. Green cells indicate a positive relationship between engagement with that program element and psychosocial outcome; red cells indicate a negative relationship.

| Engagement is associated with higher psychosocial outcomes |

Overall, **when students engage more with TSLC program elements, they report higher psychosocial outcomes** in their first two years. In particular, we find that proactive care and support of staff and interactions with peers play a central role for psychosocial outcomes. We do not find a relationship between first-year seminars and academic self-efficacy, even though seminars are designed to improve students’ academic skills. Further, non-course related interactions with instructors are consistently associated with lower psychosocial outcomes, which may reflect that students who frequently discuss career and personal issues with instructors do so because they are facing challenges. We provide recommendations related to first-year seminars and instructor interactions below.
## Table 1. Engagement with program elements associated with higher psychosocial outcomes

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mattering To TSLC</th>
<th>Mattering To Campus</th>
<th>Sense of Belonging To TSLC</th>
<th>Sense of Belonging To Campus</th>
<th>Academic Self-Efficacy</th>
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<td>Staff Care and Support</td>
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<td>Engagement in Shared Academic Courses</td>
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<td>Engagement in First Year Seminar</td>
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<td>Peer Mentoring</td>
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<td>Academic Interactions w/ TSLC Peers</td>
<td>Second year</td>
<td>Both years</td>
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<td>Social Interactions w/ TSLC Peers</td>
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<td>First year</td>
<td>Second year</td>
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<td>Course-Related Interactions w/ TSLC Instructors</td>
<td>First year</td>
<td>Both years</td>
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<td>Non-Course Interactions w/ TSLC Instructors</td>
<td>First year</td>
<td>First year</td>
<td>Both years</td>
<td>First year</td>
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Positive and significant, one year  
Positive and significant, two years  
Not significant  
Negative and significant, one year  
Negative and significant, both years

Each column represents a separate regression in which all program elements are included. Models account for students’ background characteristics and prior experiences, including initial level of the psychosocial outcome. Significance refers to the statistical likelihood that the inference is accurate, and not the result of chance.

We also investigate whether the relationship between students’ engagement with program elements and their outcomes vary by student race/ethnicity, sex, ACT scores, expected family contribution, and first-generation status. We find some indications that there may be greater gains among students from two at-promising groups (for example, students with low ACT scores may benefit more from shared academic courses and students of color may benefit more from staff care and support than their counterparts). Overall, however, we do not find consistent evidence of group differences in the relationship between program engagement and psychosocial outcomes. In other words, engaging with the program elements is similarly beneficial for all students in TSLC, regardless of background.

**STAFF CARE AND SUPPORT AND PEER INTERACTIONS HAVE A MEANINGFUL AND LASTING RELATIONSHIP WITH STUDENT OUTCOMES**

When students feel cared for and supported by staff, they consistently report higher levels of mattering, belonging, and self-efficacy throughout their first two years on campus. Further, even after students transition out of the two-year intensive, structured support offered by TSLC, the relationships students developed with staff in their second year continue to predict...
higher psychosocial outcomes in their third year. **The relationships students develop with TSLC staff are incredibly meaningful for students.**

Students who report engaging academically with their peers more during their second year report feeling a higher sense of belonging their third year. Students who have more social interactions with their peers in their second-year report higher levels of mattering to campus and academic self-efficacy in their third year. **Students’ relationships with their peers have lasting implications for their success.**

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_TSLC creates a powerful community of staff and students that is associated with improved psychosocial outcomes and to which students directly attribute their academic success_

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We can also evaluate the strength of the different aspects of TSLC by examining third-year students’ assessments of each program element. Students find meetings with program staff particularly helpful for graduating by their fifth year and for locating counseling and emotional support resources when needed. Additionally, students report the number one goal achieved by each of the other program elements is helping them **establish a peer community that supports their academic and educational success.**

**PROGRAM ENGAGEMENT AFTER YEAR TWO**

After the formal two-year TSLC program ends, students may stay connected to TSLC staff, instructors, peers, and activities. We examine patterns of students’ engagement with the program in year three and the amount of continued engagement they wanted. About half of all students are satisfied with little or no program involvement after year two.

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_In their third year, after leaving the formal structure of TSLC, many students want to stay connected and give back to the community_

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Most students who want to stay connected identify forms of involvement that are social or that give back to the TSLC program. Students who report higher levels of engagement in year three tend to identify TSLC as a more important space for connections and support. Further, students who want the highest levels of continued engagement often want to help future TSLC students because of the ways TSLC has benefitted them. These tend to be at-promise students and/or to have reported strong feelings of mattering and belonging to TSLC at the end of their second year. In short, **students who feel at home in TSLC engage in their third year in ways that maintain their sense of community.** Knowing that students have varying preferences for continued connection and support after the formal program ends can help program staff tailor opportunities for program alumni; we provide recommendations related to these findings below.
THE LINK BETWEEN PROGRAM ENGAGEMENT AND PSYCHOSOCIAL DEVELOPMENT IS SIMILAR ACROSS CAMPUSES

There are slight differences in how TSLC is implemented across campuses, as staff customize their program based on their students’ needs. For example, the UN-Omaha program has a larger share of commuter students, so TSLC staff schedule events that do not require students to return to campus late in the evening.

_TSLC staff at each campus have successfully adapted their program to meet their students’ needs_

We investigate whether the relationship between program engagement and students’ psychosocial outcomes varies by campus. Using various methodological approaches, we came to the same conclusion: **TSLC programs are producing similar results at each campus.** While the students at each campus have unique needs, TSLC programs are successfully adapting for their students.

ACADEMIC VALIDATION IS A KEY LEVER FOR STUDENT SUCCESS

We examine academic validation as a potential mechanism among all students to explain why engagement helps students build feelings of mattering to campus and improve their cumulative GPA. Academic validation refers to instructor-initiated interactions with students in- and outside of the classroom that aim to develop, facilitate, and “help students trust their innate capacity to learn and to acquire confidence in being a college student.”

We included students who were and were not in TSLC in this analysis to better understand the power of this mechanism for promoting college students’ success.

_Academic validation predicts higher psychosocial outcomes and improved academic performance_

We found that students’ feelings of validation are consistently and positively related to their feelings of mattering to campus and cumulative GPA throughout their first three years on campus. While interactions with instructors can also influence student outcomes, our work demonstrates that how students feel and the nature of their interactions with instructors matter for psychosocial and academic outcomes. **Students benefit when instructors and staff reach out and affirm their abilities and worth as learners and individuals.**

Additionally, we find that developmentally appropriate and repeated opportunities to engage in affirming major and career-related activities that are responsive to their interests, needs, backgrounds, and experiences are positively linked to students’ major and career self-efficacy.

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Specifically, the validation students receive from staff through processes like proactive advising and one-on-one meetings helps students determine major and career paths that are appropriate for them.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MAXIMIZING PROGRAM IMPACT

Our findings suggest that TSLC does an excellent job promoting students’ feelings of mattering and belonging. At the same time, we have identified three areas where TSLC can continue improving. Programs supporting at-promise students often face challenges in these three areas, so we offer recommendations to support efforts to improve students’ outcomes beyond TSLC. These recommendations are summarized here with further commentary below.

1. **First-year seminars require intentional design and implementation to support students’ development of academic self-efficacy.**

2. **College transition programs should consider how to provide support and opportunities for connection in students’ third and fourth years.**

3. **Programs that support at-promise students should build strong ties between instructors and staff to provide training and support focused on validating practices.**

FIRST-YEAR SEMINARS REQUIRE CAREFUL DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION

In our analyses, TSLC students who report high levels of engagement with first-year seminars do not report higher academic self-efficacy at the end of their first year, which is a main goal of the seminar. First-year seminars are important for building community within TSLC; however, **first-year seminars should better support students’ academic self-efficacy.**

First-year seminars are an opportunity to engage students in high-impact practices

Students learn academic skills like time management most effectively when taught in the context of academic content.\(^4\) Further, seminars are an opportunity to engage students in high-impact practices such as diversity learning and civic engagement.\(^5\) For instance, seminars could focus on contemporary social and/or political issues that connect students to the local community and make learning relevant. Effective first-year seminar practices like civic

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\(^5\)The National Resource Center on the First-Year Experience provides resources on high-impact practices in first-year seminars. ([https://sc.edu/about/offices_and_divisions/national_resource_center/index.php](https://sc.edu/about/offices_and_divisions/national_resource_center/index.php))
engagement also offer opportunities for students to reflect on their experiences, to appreciate the experiences of others, and to deepen their understanding of their college community.

**MAINTAINING PROGRAM CONNECTIONS IN YEARS THREE AND FOUR FOR STUDENTS WHO BENEFIT**

TSLC students who report wanting the highest level of continued program engagement in years three and four tend to be from at-promise groups and/or to have reported strong feelings of mattering and belonging to TSLC at the end of their second year. Given that comprehensive college transition programs have limited capacity and resources, it is important for program staff to identify innovative ways to continue supporting students’ academic and social needs after the formal program ends. Since some students are satisfied with little or no involvement after year two, these efforts should be grounded in understanding what types of support different students may benefit from.

For instance, many students are seeking a continued connection that is primarily social. Programs that encourage peer connections across cohorts help students develop relationships across a wider community. With this structure, programs can provide continued opportunities for connections among peers, instructors, and staff by explicitly inviting alumni to program dinners, sporting events, etc. This design also provides opportunities for staff to check in, potentially identifying students who may need further support.

*Additionally, many TSLC students who want continued involvement seek out leadership opportunities with the peer mentoring program and with the TSLC-affiliated student organization. However, since these opportunities are often limited, programs might create flexible volunteer opportunities for their alumni in their third and fourth years that help the program achieve its goals. For instance, alumni could connect with and provide support to current program participants by facilitating groups organized around major and career interests. Alumni could also contribute by sharing their experiences with internships, part-time jobs, volunteering, with hobbies, travelling, etc. Since the number of students who are interested in these opportunities naturally changes over time, programs should develop a list of ways that volunteers can benefit the program without creating reliance on them.*

*Finally, some TSLC students continue to rely on the program for needed academic, social, and personal support. Programs should consider supporting these students by creating structured opportunities for check-ins with staff and/or instructors by dedicating 2-3 days each semester or year to alumni who choose to participate. Formalizing this process creates boundaries that can help staff and instructors maintain a primary focus on current students, while also normalizing that it is okay to need continued support.*
EMPHASIZE VALIDATION THROUGH PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF STAFF AND INSTRUCTORS

Our results suggest that postsecondary students benefit when staff and instructors utilize validating practices. Validation is a proactive process of affirmation and recognition of students’ abilities as scholars and their diverse assets by institutional agents, including instructors and staff. By validating students in the classroom, instructors can empower students to get involved on campus and succeed academically.6

Instructors and staff can benefit from structured opportunities to learn about how to use validating practices with students

College instructors often receive little professional development focused on attending to students’ emotional and motivational needs. Programs should offer training and support to instructors about validation and what it looks like in different situations, whether in class, office hours, or less formal settings. Further, programs can offer joint development opportunities to instructors and staff to foster relationship-building across academic and student affairs, strengthening the program’s ecology of validation.

THE BOTTOM LINE

TSLC works by providing structured opportunities for learning and connection in ways that promote engagement equitably among students from diverse backgrounds. When students engage more with TSLC, they report higher psychosocial outcomes and want to give back to the community.

The proactive and caring culture of TSLC academically validates at-promise students, which is the critical link between students’ program engagement and their psychosocial and academic gains. In other words, when staff and instructors reach out to all students in ways that make them feel valued and respected, students are empowered to engage meaningfully in the program, leading to minimal differences across student groups in engagement and increased psychosocial outcomes for all students. Further, TSLC’s responsiveness to students’ aspirations, goals, needs, and past experiences makes the program more effective.

Our findings have implications for college transition programs serving a large and diverse group of students as well as institutions looking to better support at-promise students at scale. TSLC and similarly situated programs can create a powerful community of staff, instructors, and students that supports students’ sense of belonging and mattering and contributes to their academic success.