PASS

Promoting At-Promise Student Success

DESIGNING COMPREHENSIVE COLLEGE TRANSITION PROGRAMS TO SUPPORT STUDENTS' LONG-TERM SUCCESS

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This brief is intended for university leaders and staff looking to create or bolster programs on campus designed to support at-promise students. Below, we discuss how a program geared towards building a strong foundation during students' initial years on campus can help support them from matriculation through to completion.

TOPIC/ISSUE

Research and practice have documented how critical the transition and beginning of college are to setting students up for success in achieving a postsecondary degree. One form of support is a comprehensive college transition program[1] (CCTP), which provides social and academic support to students during their transition into and through their first years in higher education. These programs can be particularly valuable for at-promise (e.g., low-income, first-generation, racially minoritized) students who navigate the transition into higher education alongside additional systemic barriers. We discuss how such a program might be structured to best support students from matriculation to completion, guided by our research of the Thompson Scholars Learning Communities (TSLC) programs at the University of Nebraska campuses (Kearney, Lincoln, Omaha) as well as a growing body of research on similar programs.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

➡ **While CCTPs vary in length, it may be beneficial to consider programs that span students' entire college trajectory.** Our research found that participation in the TSLC program led to a higher sense of mattering to campus for the students' first three years and a higher sense of belonging to campus during the first two years.[2] However, the impact of this program faded when students transitioned out of the structured programs in years three and four.

DEFINITIONS

Comprehensive college transition programs (CCTPs)
Structured experiences that provide academic and social support for marginalized students during their transition into higher education. TSLC programs are one example of a CCTP.

Mattering to Campus
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 to Campus
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.

KEY TAKEAWAYS (CONT.)

➡️ **Less interaction with CCTPs in the later years of students' degree programs may result in amplified feelings of disconnect.** During their third year, most of the TSLC students engaged less than once a semester with the program, although they maintained connections with their peers after exiting the formal program. Students talked about how this disengagement led to feelings of disconnection in their third year, with one student describing it as "being pushed off a cliff." Creating ways for staff to regularly reach out to students during their third year and beyond may support students' psychosocial outcomes, academic success, and career advancement. Other CCTPs, such as Dell Scholars, Detroit Promise Path, and Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) offer students proactive, comprehensive support throughout their college education.

➡️ **While not all students want to remain involved with a CCTP after their second year, many wanted to give back to the community and to continue to receive support from staff.** In our research on TSLC, about half of all students expressed a desire for continued involvement and support after their second year.[3] Those who expressed a desire for involvement tended to be racially minoritized, the first in their families to go to college, those with lower than average expected family contributions, and those with lower than average academic preparation for college. We found that students who may be marginalized on the larger campus and/or benefit from ongoing academic support were more likely to engage in year three with TSLC peers, staff, and faculty and to report wanting ongoing engagement. Students who wanted to remain engaged often expressed a desire to give back by working as a peer mentor or otherwise volunteering with the program. Finding ways to involve program alumni as volunteers could increase the 'people power' of a CCTP and possibly foster an enduring sense of community amongst students.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Utilize low-touch, proactive outreach strategies to stay connected with students.** Low-touch outreach efforts, such as text messages to remind students to register for classes or to emphasize that students are welcome to come to the program office to talk, can help students feel like they matter and have a network of support. Programs could also plan once-a-semester alumni days that offer events, workshops, or other activities as a way of engaging students in their third year and beyond to emphasize that students continue to have a network of support. Pairing such strategies with an initial period of intensive, structured support may support students in their long-term academic success.

2. **Provide structured opportunities to give back to the program.** While at-promise students may need less direct structural support as they move through their degree program, many desire opportunities to engage and meaningfully give back to the programs that successfully launched them into college. Providing students with leadership roles and co-curricular opportunities can provide meaningful ways for students to stay connected to the program and to each other. Such opportunities could include serving as a mentor for incoming students, assisting in a course as a teaching assistant, working

for the program, or engaging in ongoing advising or mentoring conversations. These opportunities could also be limited, targeted roles based on specific program needs (e.g., serving as a guest panelist or speaker), but should be both personally and professionally meaningful for students. Using program alumni as volunteers can help maintain a sense of community across cohorts and reduce some of the burden on program staff to organize events and provide support to students, making the program easier to scale and sustain.

3. **Work with students to create transition out plans.** In addition to providing students with support while in a CCTP and expanding involvement opportunities after the formal program ends, we recommend that staff members work with students to create plans related to how to get involved and to find support after the formal program ends. Such plans might include helping students generate co-curricular opportunities and leadership roles that they hope to explore, set up advising meetings with resources in academic departments or career services, and explore academic support services. These transition plans might help the student carry their sense of mattering and belonging into fulfilling institutional relationships beyond the initial transition program.

QUESTIONS TO GUIDE PRACTICE

- What opportunities for support and involvement do you offer to students throughout their time on campus? How are these opportunities communicated to students?

- What leadership opportunities do students have within programs on campus? How do you ensure that leadership positions are equitably distributed among students?

- How do you build community within your program or on your campus? How are students involved in sustaining that community over time?

- What types of existing data can you draw on (or new assessment might you need) to understand the needs of at-promise students during the latter half of their college careers?

STUDY OVERVIEW

We studied the Thompson Scholars Learning Communities (TSLC), a set of programs providing low-income students, many of whom are also first-generation college students and racially minoritized students (whom we refer to as at-promise students) with a comprehensive array of academic, personal, and social support services. Students participate in two years of structured programming, and receive a generous scholarship that covers the cost of tuition and fees in the University of Nebraska system located at three very different types of campuses—a metropolitan college, a rural regional campus, and a research one institution. Our mixed methods study explored whether, how, and why the programs develop key psychosocial outcomes critical for college student success such as sense of belonging and academic self-efficacy. Qualitative data was gathered through longitudinal interviews with TSLC students, staff, instructors, and stakeholders, as well as through program observations and documents. Quantitative data was gathered through longitudinal surveys of students, including TSLC participants and students with similar characteristics who did not participate in TSLC, as well as administrative records.

This brief is based on findings by the research team members of the Promoting At-Promise Student Success (PASS) project and was prepared by Elise Swanson and Genia M. Bettencourt. Authors listed on the suggested citation contributed to the development of the ideas presented in this brief, and are listed alphabetically following the primary author(s) who drafted the brief. For more information about the PASS project please visit the project website: PASS. Pullias.USC.edu. The complete list of team members/co-authors can be found there.

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Notes

[1] Hallett, R., Kezar, A., Perez, R. & Kitchen, J. (2019). A typology of college transition and support programs: Situating a two year comprehensive college transition program within college access. *American Behavioral Scientist,* Online First.

[2] Melguizo, T., Martorell, F., Swanson, E., Chi, E., Park, E., & Kezar, A. (2019). *The effects of a comprehensive college transition program on psychosocial factors associated with success in college.* (EdWorkingPaper: 19-158). Retrieved from Annenberg Institute at Brown University: https://doi.org/10.26300/840r-9948

[3] Cole, D., Culver, K.C., Kitchen, J., Rivera, G., & Swanson, E. (2020). *How and why a comprehensive college transition program works: Promoting at-promise student success in the Thompson Scholars Learning Communities.* (Pullias Center Policy Brief). Retrieved from: https://pullias.usc.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Formative-TSLC-policy-brief-PUBLIC-FINAL.pdf