

PASS

Promoting At-Promise Student Success

USC Rossier
Pullias Center for
Higher Education

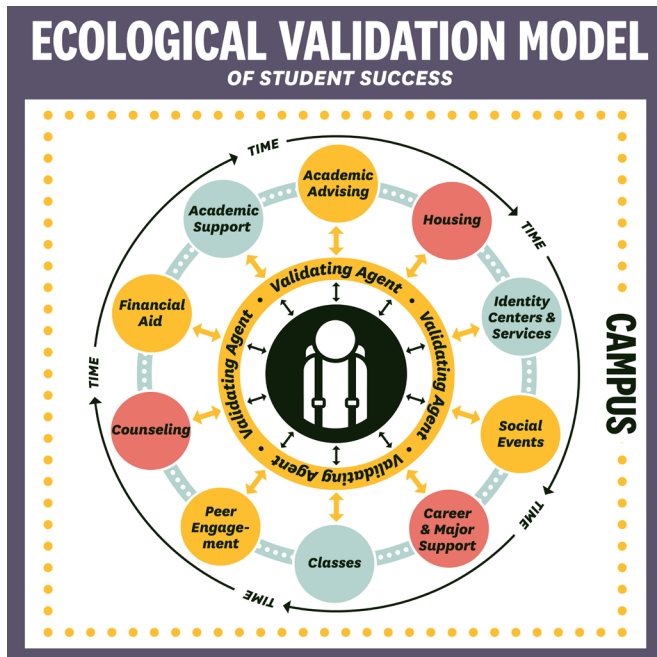
RE-ENVISIONING CAMPUSES TO HOLISTICALLY SUPPORT STUDENTS: THE ECOLOGICAL VALIDATION MODEL OF STUDENT SUCCESS

JULY 2021

This brief is designed to support faculty, staff, and administrators looking to support at-promise students holistically across higher education institutions. Here, we review how the Ecological Validation Model of Student Success provides guidance for campuses by challenging prior models that focus on specific initiatives and argues for a student-centered, asset-oriented approach across campus.

TOPIC/ISSUE

Many postsecondary institutions seek to improve the retention and graduation rates of the at-promise (e.g., low-income, first-generation, racially minoritized) students they serve. However, new initiatives are often costly and may serve only a subset of the student population, such as first-year seminars or identity centers. Moreover, these programs and services do not always yield the desired outcomes. For example, two institutions could create mentoring programs for first-generation college students and only one of the two may have an impact.



Instead, we argue that *how* programs or services get created is more important than what gets created. Based upon our research, we developed the Ecological Validation Model of Student Success to illustrate how validating experiences can become embedded within postsecondary policies, practices and structures. Validation is a process through which institutional agents—instructors, staff, and peers—show interest in students’ academic success and personal well-being.¹ In this process, the onus for student success is placed on institutional agents who provide support drawing on the assets, strengths, and capabilities that at-promise students possess. Validation theory centers *how* student support is delivered, rather than what support is delivered. The Ecological Validation Model of Student Success is “an approach to at-promise student support and success that is ecological in nature and validates at-promise students’ multiple identities, assets, strengths, and innate capabilities for success in a web of multiple coordinated student support contexts over time.”² The framework draws from Laura Rendón’s validation theory and Urie Bronfenbrenner’s ecology model to focus on

four factors: what is being validated (Person's characteristics, experiences, identities), how validating occurs (Process), the multiple program curated environments where validation occurs (Context), and when validation happens (Time).

The core of this model draws on the concept of validation, which occurs when various institutional stakeholders (e.g., faculty, staff, and peers) show interest in students' academic success and personal wellbeing³. These stakeholders are responsible for recognizing the assets, strengths, and capabilities that students bring with them to higher education and aiding students in proactively drawing upon these reserves to promote their success. The ecology focus of the model emphasizes that student success is the result of interactions between people and students within educational environments⁴. As a result, validation is a continual process that is affirmed not through one individual or program but holistically (integrating academic and interpersonal aspects of students)

KEY TAKEAWAYS

➔ **It matters more how educators support students than what types of interventions get created.** While learning communities, mentoring, proactive advising, and other programs can support at-promise students, their success is often contingent on the underlying approaches utilized in their design. Here, we argue that rather than recreating specific programmatic interventions, institutions should focus on developing and expanding those approaches and support. Specifically, an ecological validation is rooted in the belief that students come to college with assets, strengths, and capabilities to foster their success; thus, a primary goal of institutions is to nurture and develop those existing qualities.

➔ **Implementing a validating approach requires faculty, staff, and administrators to examine and dismantle deficit-oriented approaches and perspectives.** Validation moves the onus for student learning to institutional agents beyond merely individual students. These institutional agents then center the strengths, assets, and capabilities that at-promise students have to support them in being successful. In order to accomplish this goal, professional development opportunities are needed that involve continued engagement with institutional data and reflection on practice. For example, a campus could develop a multi-year professional development strategy that involves every program and department on campus getting more information about validating experiences for at-promise students and then exploring how that information could be applied. Leadership can model and prioritize creating validating experiences for at-promise students across campus.

➔ **The Ecological Validation Model of Student Success requires that institutions move away from silos of support. An ecological approach to validation requires coordination across contexts.** Creating ecological validation requires institutions to create initiatives, structures, and expectations that embed validating experiences across contexts such as classes, financial aid, counseling, housing, registrar and advising. Every interaction is an opportunity to create a validating experience for students. For example, a student struggling with their academic workload might first meet with their academic advisor. Rather than simply providing referrals to campus tutoring, in ecological validation the advisor would work with the student, campus resources (e.g., tutoring), and faculty to develop a plan of action. This plan of action would draw upon the students' prior educational experiences and the strategies that previously supported their academic success.

➔ **Validating experiences involve holistic support.** The challenges students experience tend to be interrelated. For example, financial issues may be related to mental health and an issue with a roommate may be related to academic performance. Validating experiences require being aware of the holistic nature of student needs. That is not to say that every institutional agent needs to be an expert in providing holistic support. However, ecological validation involves acknowledging how these challenges intersect and then having institutional agents take the responsibility of connecting students with a person on campus who can provide support in areas where they may not have expertise.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. Train institutional agents on validation and how to implement validation in practice.** A key part of training and development for faculty, staff, and administrators should be around the concept of validation and how to support at-promise students from asset-oriented approaches. For example, many communities of color utilize family-centered processes related to college attendance and success. Recognizing and supporting a collaborative approach to college persistence, in comparison to the individualistic focus of many institutions, may be one way to validate students and utilize existing supports to enable their success.
- 2. Identify existing programs and offices to examine how and where validation occurs.** While higher education institutions often feel pulled to develop new initiatives in response to student needs, here we recommend resisting that urge to instead better understand how students experience existing institutional structures. By understanding the current systems of (in)validation on campus, institutional leaders can more effectively target how to integrate validating practices.
- 3. Create a culture in which all interactions with students strive to be validating experiences.** Instructors, staff, administrators and other institutional agents should look for ways to incorporate validation within each interaction. To provide holistic support, institutional agents should connect students with a person who can provide support when the issue is outside of their area of expertise. Breaking down silos within higher education also involves evaluating reward structures and job descriptions that tend to privilege narrowly focusing on one aspect of student support instead of exploring ways to integrate and align support systems.

QUESTIONS TO GUIDE PRACTICE

- What types of training or development might you need to utilize validation in your own work? To support others in using validation?
- What are the assets, strengths, and capabilities of the at-promise populations at your institution?
- What validating practices does your institution, program, or course already use? What has been successful? Challenging?

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 were gathered through longitudinal interviews with TSLC students, staff, instructors, and stakeholders, as well as through program observations and documents. Quantitative data were 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 Ronald Hallett and Genie 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.

Recommended Citation

Hallett, R., Bettencourt, G.M., Kezar, A., Kitchen, J.A., Perez, R., & Reason, R. (2021). *Re-envisioning campuses to holistically support students: The ecological validation model of student success*[Brief]. USC Pullias Center for Higher Education.

Notes

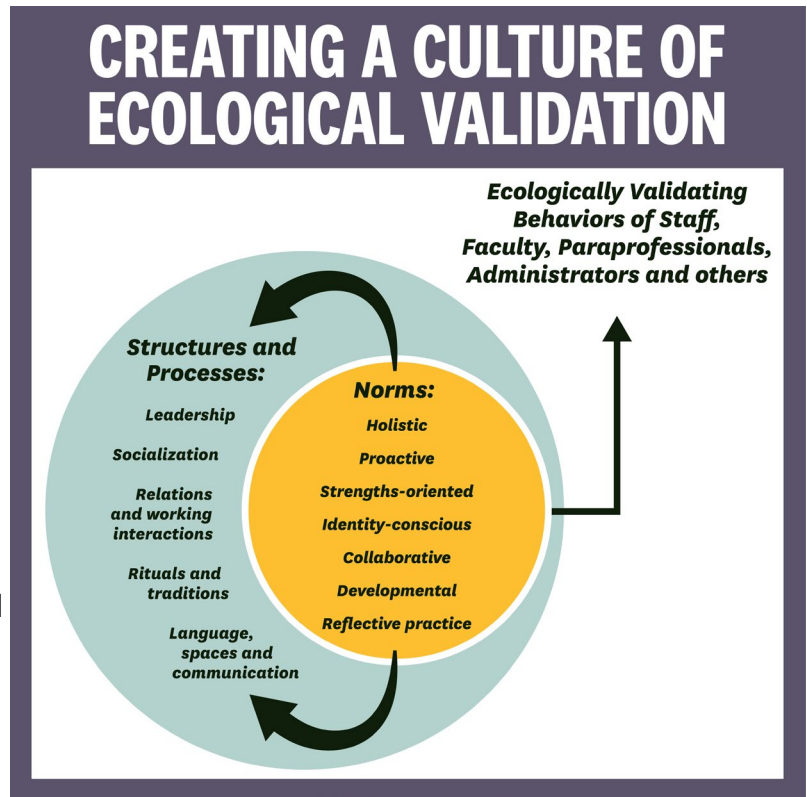
1. Rendón, L. I. (1994). Validating culturally diverse students: Toward a new model of learning and student development. *Innovative Higher Education*, 19, 33-50.
2. Kitchen, J.A., Perez, R., Hallett, R., Kezar, A., & Reason, R. (2020, November 21). *Ecology of validation: A new student support model for promoting college success among low-income, first-generation, and racially minoritized students* [Conference presentation]. Association for the Study of Higher Education, Online. <https://www.ashe.ws//Files/Past%20Conferences/ASHE%202020%20Program%20Book.pdf>
3. Rendón, L. I. (2002). Community college Puente: A validating model of education. *Educational Policy*, 16, 642-667; Rendón, L. I., & Muñoz, S. M. (2011). Revisiting validation theory: Theoretical foundations, applications, and extensions. *Enrollment Management Journal*.
4. Bronfenbrenner, U. (1994). Ecological models of human development. In *International Encyclopedia of Education*, Vol 3. (2nd ed.) Elsevier.

Promoting At-Promise Student Success

CREATING A CULTURE OF ECOLOGICAL VALIDATION TO IMPROVE AT-PROMISE STUDENT EXPERIENCES AND OUTCOMES

A culture of 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. A culture of 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 seven norms: holistic, proactive, strengths-oriented, identity-conscious, 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. A culture of 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 presented in the culture of ecological validation are not necessarily new in higher education; however, the framework focuses on being intentional about enacting all seven norms to embed a culture of ecological validation into current higher education structures. The framework we present involves a comprehensive approach to addressing the larger structural and culture issues instead of focusing on siloed and piecemeal attempts to address smaller problems. A culture of ecological validation is an intentional and comprehensive approach that is best accomplished within a cross-functional committee.



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.

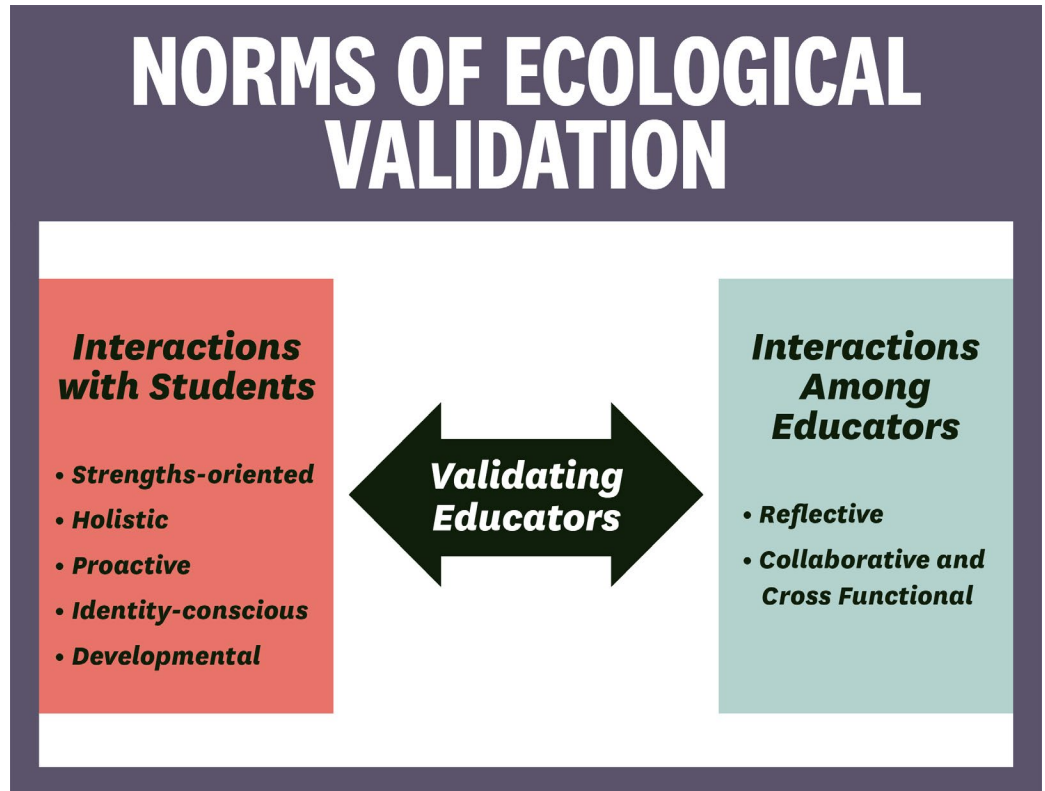
Strengths-oriented: Focuses on the cultural assets, talents and skills, previous successes, and personality traits that students bring with them to campus rather than employing a deficit approach, which focuses primarily on the assumed challenges that at-promise college students may face.

Identity-conscious: Intentionally considers students' identities—with acute attention to the identities of those students from underserved (e.g., at-promise) backgrounds.

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.



Recommended Citation

Hallett, R.E., Kezar, A., Kitchen, J. A., Perez, R., Corwin, Z. B., & Nagbe, M. (2022). *Creating a culture of ecological validation to improve at-promise student experiences and outcomes*. USC Pullias Center for Higher Education.