PASS

Promoting At-Promise Student Success

TAILORING PROGRAMS TO SUPPORT STUDENT SUCCESS

AUGUST 2021

This brief is aimed at staff, faculty, and administrators working to create effective programs to meet the needs of at-promise students. Here, we share the idea of tailoring as a means to personalize support to individual students while simultaneously engaging in a process of assessment and development that can be scaled up to support additional student needs.

TOPIC/ISSUE

While institutions have paid increased attention to the needs of at-promise college students, enduring gaps continue related to their persistence and graduation. Often support services exist within silos to target a single aspect of identity (e.g., financial aid, multicultural center) and the onus to gain support is placed on students to connect resources to build comprehensive support systems. Instead, we propose the idea of tailoring as a means for providing support for students that meet individual needs and provide proactive support broadly. To tailor programs, staff, administrators, and faculty (hereafter referred to as institutional agents) do two things simultaneously.[1] They identify individual student needs while exploring if those needs reflect broader trends among the students served in the program. Staff then develop initiatives within the overall program for groups of students to address their multiple needs and complex identities. As compared to case management models that operate on an individual level, institutions may have many tailored programmatic supports, effectively serving thousands of students. In the Thompson Scholars Learning Communities (TSLC), tailoring was an effective way to support students with learning disabilities, mental health concerns, undocumented status, and/or financial insecurity.

The TSLC program approached tailoring using five steps, outlined as follows:

1. develop high-trust relationships with students so practitioners can effectively learn about students' needs, anticipate challenges, and provide personalized support

2. help students better understand and articulate their own needs through guided reflection and self-assessment of academic and socio-emotional skills

3. collect a wide range of information from varied sources (e.g., self-assessments, peer input, transcripts) in order to build a comprehensive understanding of students' needs that encompasses individual concerns and broader trends across the population served

4. identify interventions that are potentially useful to students, pursue related professional development, and partner with campus organizations to coordinate resources/support

5. develop solutions that are tailored to individual needs, and eventually scalable to the group

DEFINITIONS

Major and Career Self-Efficacy (MCSE): 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.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

➡️ **Tailoring is a way to support students' unique and multidimensional needs. Tailoring entails taking into account students' multiple, intersecting identities while also taking inventory of and developing programmatic interventions that can support those needs.** For example, TSLC created a program to support students on academic probation, who they noted were primarily students who came in with low ACT scores, worked many hours, and were parents. First, they gathered data to see trends among students on academic probation and noticed key subpopulations experiencing challenges. These students were then enrolled in a specific program where they had more frequent meetings with staff, additional study hours, and increased grade checks. Ongoing assessments were conducted to see how the program was effective and devise additional areas of growth.

➡️ **To tailor programs, staff engage in a process of simultaneously understanding individual needs and assessing how needs are shared across students.** Institutional agents work at two levels simultaneously: interacting with students to understand their multiple individual needs and exploring how those needs might be shared amongst other students. For example, a career advisor may discover that a couple of their first-generation college student advisees are having difficulty developing resumes and cover letters. That advisor could collect data informally or formally to see how these trends applied across other first-generation students and other minoritized groups on campus while also trying to learn more about the specific obstacles their advisees encountered. The end result might be a workshop on developing career documents geared towards first-generation students and other subpopulations.

➡️ **Tailoring draws upon three design principles: asset-based, student-centered, and holistic.** The programs built upon the capabilities that students bring with them with them (asset-based), while considering both academic and interpersonal aspects of individual experiences (holistic). These approaches also considered how individual student experiences could inform future programming for students with similar identities and experiences (student-centered).

➡️ **Tailoring can reduce the cognitive load of students.** Rather than placing the onus of navigating higher education on at-promise students, tailoring proactively assesses student needs and works to adapt institutions to support diverse groups.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Prioritize developing high trust, caring relationships.** Trust serves two vital purposes in the tailoring process: (1) students are more likely to share their challenges and aspirations if they trust an institutional agent, thus allowing for program staff to more deeply understand barriers and strategies; and (2) students are more likely to engage with/listen to program, peers, practitioners if they have developed trusting relationship.

2. **Gather examples of possible interventions to draw upon.** While the final implementation of any tailored programming requires specificity to campus dynamics and student needs, much can be learned by sharing resources. Shared repositories of tailoring solutions provide a helpful starting place to explore and generate new ideas. At an institutional level, designate one office to track examples of tailored programs that could serve as a model for others. Higher education professional organizations can also assist in creating these repositories across institutions or programmatic areas. Moreover, investment in professional development amongst institutional stakeholders may allow for successful initiatives in other contexts to be adopted and modified given individual circumstances.

3. **Offer clear signposts to students.** Once programs have identified and created program elements to support students, effective tailoring entails making sure students know which resources exist and how to access them.

4. **Pay attention to the ways that individual needs and opportunities inform how a program and its institutional agents serve a group.** Gaining nuanced appreciation for students' backgrounds, challenges and navigational strategies has potential for guiding how program elements and practitioner approaches evolve in response to student needs.

QUESTIONS TO GUIDE PRACTICE

- What types of needs have you identified amongst the at-promise students on your campus over the past year? How did you learn about those needs?

- What types of data might you need to collect in order to understand if individual concerns are shared broadly across multiple groups?

- Can you think of a time when your institution or program has attempted to tailor a programmatic intervention to meet student needs? What was the instance and how did it go?

- How do you communicate to students the range of resources that exist to support their needs?

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.

Recommended citation:

Bettencourt, G.M., Corwin, Z.B., Kezar, A., Kitchen, J., Estes, H., Hallett, R., & Perez, R. (2021). *Tailoring programs to support student success* [Brief]. USC Pullias Center for Higher Education.

Notes

1. Kezar, A., Kitchen, J., Estes, H., Hallett, R., & Perez, R. (2020). Tailoring programs to best support low-income, first-generation, and racially minoritized college student success. *Journal of College Student Retention*. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1177/1521025120971580; Kezar, A., Perez, R., Kitchen, J., & Hallet, R. E. (forthcoming). Learning how to tailor a program to support low-income, first-generation, and racially minoritized student success.