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Scaling Success for Low-Income, First-Generation in College, and/or Racially Minoritized Students Through a Culture of Ecological Validation

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Drawing from a 5-year mixed methods study of the Thompson Scholar Learning Community (TSLC), we discuss how holistic, proactive, strengthens-oriented, identity conscious, collaborative and reflective norms create a culture of ecological validation wherein at-promise students can experience college success. These norms were then operationalized through the program structures and processes (leadership, socialization, language, space, and communication, ritual and traditions, working relationships and interactions) embedding them into the work of faculty, staff, and administrators. Our study provides empirical evidence of how a culture of ecological validation can provide scaled support for at-promise students. Lastly, this article contributes to the literature by combining three key concepts that have not been explored together—validation theory, college success cultures, and ecological systems theory focused on at-promise students.

Keywords: campus culture, diverse student success, validation and ecological systems theories

A significant challenge facing higher education is how to increase the success of first-generation, low-income, and racially minoritized students, which we discuss collectively in this article as at-promise students[1] (Aud et al., 2010; Pascarella et al., 2004; Renn & Reason, 2013; Seidman, 2005). There are significant equity gaps in the completion rates of these student populations compared to their peers who are from more privileged backgrounds (Aud et al., 2010; Seidman, 2005; Shapiro et al., 2018; The Pell Institute, 2015; U.S. Department of Education, 2018). Colleges, foundations, and national organizations have experimented with a plethora of fragmented interventions—student mentoring programs, cultural centers, supplemental instruction—to improve at-promise student success (Douglas & Attewell, 2014; Kezar, 2019; Means & Pyne, 2017; Purdie & Rosser, 2011; Swanson et al., 2017; The Pell Institute, 2009). Even though these efforts have been in place for several decades, postsecondary institutions have made little progress in improving at-promise students' transition to college and retention rates (Bailey et al., 2015; Mayhew et al., 2016; Seidman, 2005; The Pell Institute, 2015).

Museus (2014) challenged higher education to consider the overall campus culture and whether and how it supports racially diverse students' success. Museus's critique about creating a more holistic approach is echoed in the broader literature about student success. Tinto (2012) called for campuses to halt creation of myriad disconnected student success programs, to reevaluate their support programs, and to create a more connected and aligned environment of student support. Means and Pyne (2017) also illustrate how this challenge continues in their recent work about low-income first-generation college students struggling to develop a sense of belonging even when accessing myriad, but disjointed support programs. Yet, there is scant empirical research on how to create campus cultures that support at-promise student success. This study explores a college student transition and success program that is comprehensive, integrated, and large scale and our research identified a culture in which at-promise students succeed, a culture we termed ecological validation (Kitchen et al., 2021). The questions guiding this specific article are: How is a culture of ecological validation created? And how is a culture of ecological validation sustained?

The purpose of this article is to explore what norms constitute a culture of ecological validation and how a culture is created that sustains ecological validation enabling it to persist even when specific institutional agents leave the institution. Drawing from a 5-year mixed methods study of the Thompson Scholar Learning Community (TSLC), we discuss how holistic, proactive, strengthens-oriented, identity-conscious, collaborative, and reflective norms create a culture of ecological validation wherein at-promise students can experience college success. Our study provides empirical evidence of how a culture of ecological validation can provide the holistic solution that leaders have been looking for to address scaled support for at-promise students. This article focuses on data from faculty, administrators, and staff describing how they went about creating and sustaining this culture. We have a separate article about how at-promise students described their experience of support through a culture of ecological validation, which was the impetus for this article on how the culture was created.[2] Lastly, this article contributes to the

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[1] We elected to use the term "at-promise" to shift focus away from deficit language like "at-risk" to emphasize the strengths, assets, and potential of these student groups (Harper, 2010). This term is increasingly being used in *K*-12 and higher education literature.

[2] It is important to note that students of all three categories—low income, racialized minority, and first generation—felt validated within the program.

literature by combining three key concepts that have not been explored together—validation theory, college success cultures, and ecological systems theory focused on at-promise students.

Literature Review

In this section, we review the literature on how campuses can create institutional cultures that support college student success in a holistic, scaled, and transformational manner. Yet, this research emerged from studies of predominantly White and economically privileged campuses for predominantly White and economically privileged students. Thus, we trace the critique of and revision of the literature on cultures of college student success based on research with at-promise student groups. To date, this has most often been racially minoritized students. We argue that an organizational or campus culture[3] approach to student success is needed since most research with at-promise populations has resulted in a plethora of fragmented side programs rather than a holistic and comprehensive approach for supporting them at scale. We end with validation theory and the concept of ecological validation that emerged in our data as the key underlying mechanism for supporting at-promise college students' success.

College Success Cultures

For decades, researchers have noted the importance of campus culture in student success, learning, and development. Most higher education researchers define campus culture as the overall environment that involves its mission, enacted through values that become embedded in practices and policies, and socialized into faculty, staff, and students (Kuh, 1991). Kuh and Hall (1993) defined culture as "the collective, mutually shaping patterns of institutional history, mission, physical settings, norms, traditions, values, practices, beliefs and assumptions that guide behavior of individuals and groups in an institution" (p. 3). Kuh's (1991) *Involving Colleges* is one of the first detailed articulations of and arguments for how overall college environments can support student success. While he documented effective educational programs like mentoring, undergraduate research, internships or study abroad (later to be termed high impact practices), his overall message was that "involving colleges"—ones where students tend to learn and develop more—are those with an overall culture that encourages students to be engaged with or "involved" in their learning.

Subsequent studies reaffirmed the value of campus cultures to student success. For example, Kuh et al. (2005) identified—documenting effective educational practices (DEEP)—a key set of cultural elements: Living the mission, an unshakeable focus on student success, clear pathways for student success, environments adapted for educational enrichment, and improvement-oriented ethos and a shared responsibility for educational quality and student success. This culture resulted in certain practices, such as collaboration between academic and student affairs, socializing faculty and staff to a student success orientation, using data about student success to guide decisions, matching resource investment to data, aligning programs and services, and making space for differences and affirming diverse perspectives. As Kuh et al. (2005) noted, "virtually every study of high-performing entities concludes that culture is the single most important element that must be altered and managed in order to change what an organization values and how it acts" (p. 50).

Yet, these cultures of student success were studied largely with predominantly white institutions (PWIs), particularly *Involving Colleges*. While DEEP included a historically Black college and Hispanic serving institution, most campuses profiled were PWIs. A critique of the research on student success cultures is that it reflects the culture focused on White, wealthy, and male students. This is not to say that this line of research is irrelevant to at-promise students. Aspects of these student success cultures have been shown to be important to low-income, first-generation college and racially minoritized students, such as high impact practices. Yet, the notion of campus culture and its role in supporting at-promise students has been questioned (Finley & McNair, 2013).

Hurtado et al. (1999) highlighted how campus cultures are often hostile to racially minoritized students. Their work illuminated the role of climate, which is the more immediately felt environment for students, and created space for discussion of how dominant cultures reflect only certain values, which in turn can silence minoritized groups and marginalize their experience of the environment. Hurtado et al.'s work also connected notions of campus cultures to their history (often of racism), their local context, and their broader political environment (that is also racialized). Yet, the research that emerged from this understanding of campus culture has mostly focused on climate, documenting the negative experiences of minoritized students (Museus & Jayakumar, 2012). Scholars' work on climate disrupted the narrative that existing campus cultures support the success of racially minoritized (Museus & Jayakumar, 2012) and other underserved student groups, such as low-income and first-generation in college (Kezar, 2012).

Student Success Cultures That Support At-Promise Students

Building on the work of subcultures and campus racial climates, researchers have specifically begun to explore broader institutional cultures that support at-promise students. As Museus et al. note, the focus on campus climate "has failed to create a holistic perspective regarding how institutions can adapt" to support diverse student success and "Instead isolated programs and activities are designed to make students feel welcome" (p. 5). The impact of such programs is fleeting and fails to change the overall environment. Museus et al. suggest an emphasis back on campus culture, rather than climate, is needed to rectify these shortcomings and put the onus on the overall campus for student success, not just programs. Museus's and Jayakumar's (2012) work on campus racial culture moves toward rethinking how we define culture to include more than White middle-class values—they define culture as patterns of tacit beliefs, values, assumptions and norms manifest in artifacts, language, and symbols, but *differentially shaped by the experiences of various groups*.

Museus (2011) used this view to explore cultures that support the success of students from different cultural backgrounds. In examining three PWIs that had equitable persistence for racially minoritized students, he found that these campuses had a culture characterized by strong networking values, a commitment to targeted support, a belief in a humanizing educational experience, and a sense of responsibility for the success of racially minoritized students. Museus (2014) posited a culturally engaging campus environment (or culture; CECE) that focuses specifically on supporting students from diverse cultural backgrounds and includes nine elements:

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[3] We use culture in two ways in the article. When we are referring to organizational or campus culture, we use that term. We also write about those who are conscious of culture and identity and refer to this as culture consciousness.

1. cultural familiarity among faculty and staff who share their common backgrounds,
2. culturally relevant knowledge that provides an opportunity to learn about their own racial cultures,
3. cultural community service where students give back to the communities they came from,
4. opportunities for meaningful cross-cultural engagement,
5. a collectivist orientation where individual achievement is downplayed and group work supported,
6. culturally validating environments in which their backgrounds and communities are noted to be worthy,
7. a humanizing education environment where care is communicated by faculty and staff to students,
8. a proactive philosophy where faculty and staff take responsibility to reach out to students, and
9. holistic support in which students receive both academic and interpersonal support and for which faculty or staff help them to identify such support.

CECE was a synthesis of elements that have been empirically documented to support the success of racially diverse students. This culture of racially diverse student success is articulated within a larger student success model that includes external issues shaping students, individual variations, academic dispositions, sense of belonging, and other constructs. Museus et al. (2017) also demonstrated that students' perceptions that their campuses were characterized by the nine CECE elements were positively related to an improved sense of belonging. In addition to exploring the role of culture on diverse student success, CECE emphasizes the importance of engaging students' cultural backgrounds and identities (Museus, 2011). Being identity-conscious helps to enact any educational practice in ways that are more supportive of students from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Little et al. (2018) also explored how a variety of organizational structures and processes can be deployed to create a culture supportive of all students' success. They noted the importance of foundational aspects such as a university's mission and values statements which can focus campus expectations for supporting its students, particularly at-promise students. Their research highlighted how expectations need to be translated into new working relationships and practices. For example, the way people work together and how administrators cultivate an environment can encourage student affairs to collaborate with faculty and staff to create effective ways to support their students, particularly at-promise students. In addition, administrators can require faculty, staff, and peer mentors to attend training that help them enact campuses' commitment to supporting all students (Nora, 2001; Nora et al., 2011). To date, few studies explore how the broader campus culture can support (not just hinder) at-promise college student success. The few studies on this topic tend to focus on racially minoritized students. There is a need for studies that explore how the campus culture can be supportive of multiple minoritized student groups—for example, low income, first generation, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer (LGBTQ+). In the next section, we briefly review ecological validation, which posits an approach to support a diverse group of at-promise students.

Ecological Validation

Rendón (1994) defined validation as "an enabling, confirming, and supportive process initiated by in- and out-of-class agents" (p. 44). The theory of validation emerged from studying the success of low-income, first-generation college, and racially minoritized students that were a small sample in a larger study of "general" student success and trying to understand what helped these students persist. Rendón (1994) places the responsibility of initiating validating experiences on those professionals who work on college campuses. Validation occurs inside and outside of the classroom and is a process, rather than an outcome. Rendón (1994) distinguished between the two types of validation: interpersonal and academic. Interpersonal validation fostered social and personal adjustment while academic validation "helped students trust their innate capacity to learn and to acquire confidence in being a college student" (p. 40). According to Rendón (1994, 2002), academic validation is affirming at-promise students' possibility of academic success, convincing students of their ability to contribute to the process of knowledge creation, building upon students' previous knowledge—often subjective knowledge acquired outside the traditional academic classroom, and encouraging students to develop their own voices.

Rendón's theory has subsequently been used as a framework in studies that connect validating experiences to student success for first-generation college students (Jehangir, 2009), racially minoritized students (Nora et al., 2011), and low-income students (Nora et al., 2011). Validation has been linked to higher retention rates (Garza, 2017; Holland, 1995; Lundberg et al., 2007; Perrakis, 2003; Rendón, 2002) and greater involvement in college experiences (Holmes et al., 2007; Lundberg et al., 2007; Rendón, 1994; Saggio & Rendón, 2004). Studies over the last 2 decades confirm the value of this theory for understanding the success of at-promise students.[4] Current research reinforces Rendón's study about the importance of validation and being asset based. For example, Bettencourt (2019) notes how her studies of low-income and working-class students identified how campuses should: "find ways to center the assets [of] working-class participants [that] might help those students feel affirmed and welcomed on campus" (p. 11).

One of the challenges of Rendón's theory is that validation rests in the hands of individual institutional agents. In practice, it relies on "kind" individuals to decide to commit to validating students. While Rendón (1994, 2002) called for validating experiences to be intentionally incorporated into the structures of higher education broadly, this was not a phenomenon she empirically documented as it largely did not exist at scale (exceptions being TRIO). Additionally, many postsecondary institutions have found it difficult to move toward validating structures given the entrenched nature of White, middle-class values within the structure of higher education (Bettencourt, 2019; Martin, 2015; Means & Pyne, 2017). Little research has documented what validation looks like when it is more broadly adopted and becomes part of the institutional structure. Our study explores Rendón's (1994) validation theory and how it can be embedded within campus cultures in order to make all students succeed.

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[4] Some scholars have critiqued Rendón's validation theory for not challenging dominant white institutional cultures, which create invalidating experiences to start with (Cabrera et al., 2016; Yosso, 2005). We are aware of these critiques and also believe in moving toward transformed society and social structures. We found that ecological validation alters the overall environment moving toward this type of systems change and challenge to existing systems.

Another key theory that we turned to for explanations of student development and success was ecological systems theory. Bronfenbrenner and his colleagues framed student development and success from an ecological systems perspective in his Person–Process–Context–Time (PPCT) model (Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Renn, 2003). He argued that the interaction between students (and their personal characteristics such as race, personalities, generational status, gender, motivations, interests) and the multiple contexts they come into contact within their immediate environment (e.g., classrooms, student clubs, friend groups, service learning) is the primary driver of their development and success over time (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). Student engagement with their multiple environments has a synergistic effect on their success, positioning student development and success as the result of their interaction with a web (or ecology) of support contexts rather than any one singular or isolated context. Ecological systems theory contends that those environments closest to the student that they come into direct contact with (e.g., classroom, student club, residence hall), what Bronfenbrenner called "microsystems," have the strongest effect on development and success and these are commonly the focus of research utilizing Bronfenbrenner's model. The interaction between students' immediate contexts (i.e., microsystems) occurs within the "mesosystem," and can also affect student development. For instance, if a faculty member for a student's major (one microsystem) collaborated with the student's advisor (another microsystem) to support the student's career development, that would be an example of the mesosystem at work without directly involving the student per se. While Bronfenbrenner (1994) would argue that other more distal contexts (e.g., state policy context, federal financial aid policy contexts) could have an indirect effect on students, we elected to focus our study on their more immediate environments because the PPCT model explains that the multiple immediate contexts students engage with directly are the primary drivers of their success.

Ecological validation brings together an ecological and validating approach to student support where educators promote student success by validating students' assets, strengths, and innate capabilities for success across multiple aligned and coordinated contexts over time (Kitchen et al., 2021). Instead of focusing on what elements (e.g., mentoring and proactive advising) should be included within support programs, ecological validation highlights the importance of focusing on how programs are enacted. Framed by Rendón's (1994) concept of validation and Bronfenbrenner's (1994) PPCT model, we describe ecological validation that we discovered in terms of *what* is being validated (Person), *how* validation occurs (Process), the multiple program-curated environments *where* validation occurs (Context), and *when* validation happens (Time). While validation theory tends to look at interactions between an individual institutional agent and student, ecological validation focuses on an integrated approach that included coordinated validating experiences across a student's microsystems, which involves interactions between institutional agents at the mesolevel. An important concept underlying ecological validation is that students' interpersonal and academic experiences influence each other. As a result, holistic approaches to student support are more effective. A holistic approach to validation requires gathering enough information to understand the student's issue before assuming how to resolve it.

Study Design

This article draws from the Promoting At-Promise Student Success (PASS) project, which was a 5-year mixed methods study of the TSLC—located at three University of Nebraska campuses (Cole et al., 2019). The comprehensive 2-year college[5] transition program includes multiple forms of support, including shared academic courses, peer mentoring, proactive advising, first-year seminar, and college success events (for further discussion of the program design, see https://pass.pullias.usc.edu/methodology/). The program aims to create a space where low-income students, who are also often racially minoritized and first generation in college, successfully transition and thrive in college (See Appendix A for a breakdown of student demographics in the program).

The study design included quantitative data including longitudinal surveys and institutional transcript data as well as qualitative case study data including program observations, longitudinal interviews with 83 students for 3 years, and interviews with program staff, instructors, administration, and campus stakeholders who collaborated with the program. An interpretive case study design was chosen because this allowed us to use multiple data sources and types to understand our research questions around how staff and faculty create and sustain a supportive culture. Document analysis and interviews with long-time faculty, staff, and stakeholders allowed us to see the evolution of the culture over time. Observations provided us access to the culture at present and how norms were lived and articulated.

For exploring the program culture, we primarily focus on the interpretive case study (Stake, 1996) that drew from observational data and interviews with program staff because that was where the culture was most clearly evident. (For more information about the design, see https://pass.pullias.usc.edu/methodology/). The overall interpretive case study included document analysis that spanned since the development of the program, as well as documents about each campus context including strategic plans, institutional data on students, and governing board and leadership documents. These documents were used to contextualize the observations and interview data but were less a direct source of data for this article. Case study data also included digital diary interviews following a group of 83 students for 3 years where they completed monthly video journals followed up with one-on-one interviews that provided a detailed understanding of their experience. It is the student data that helped us initially identify a culture of ecological validation.

Campus Case Studies

The University of Nebraska Omaha (UNO) campus is a metropolitan university that serves approximately 12,000 undergraduate students who are racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse. The Kearney campus is a university located in a rural area that serves approximately 4,000 undergraduate students. The Lincoln campus is a research-oriented land grant university located in the state capital and a member of the Big Ten Conference that serves approximately 20,000 undergraduate students. The varying types of universities allowed us to identify common themes that may be transferable to a wide range of 4-year institutions. Each TSLC program served between 200 and 600 at-promise students during their first 2 years of college with approximately 2,700 students (including those in their third year and beyond) served across the three campuses each year. Students in the program received a 5-year scholarship that covered approximately the cost of tuition and fees. All of the students came from low-income backgrounds (expected family contribution; EFC of $10,000 or less); over 60% of the students were the first in their families to attend college; and, many identified as racially minoritized (University of Nebraska Omaha; UNO, 66%; University of Nebraska Lincoln; UNL, 36%; University of Nebraska Kearney; UNK, 29%).

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[5] This program starts in the students' first year and is not a transfer program.

Observations

Each campus had a lead qualitative researcher who conducted observations over a 4-year period. Researchers attended retreats to create guidelines related to case study observation that resulted in a case study template that was used by each researcher to obtain consistent data on key areas of inquiry. This same template was used to connect the other forms of data as well as organize and analyze the multiple data sources. In order to gain a clear understanding of the program structures and culture, we gathered the majority of our observational data during the first 2 years of the study and we visited the campus at least once a month for several days each time. We coordinated with the program director and staff members to identify key events that they felt we should observe during the first year of the study. During the second year of the study, we continued to solicit recommendations from the director and staff while also reviewing student interviews to identify aspects of the program they felt were important. In the final 2 years of data collection our observations were reduced and we focused on observing new program elements as well as gathering observational data of the program spaces when we visited the campuses to conduct interviews. We gathered over 200 hr of observation at each campus—over 600 hr of observation across the three campuses. We observed staff meetings, program orientation, casual hangout spaces, events, shared academic classes, study spaces, and training for staff, instructors, and mentors.

Since the students and staff supported the research project, we did not conceal data collection. We brought a notebook or laptop to each observation and took notes. As appropriate, we also gathered documents or photos related to the observation. For example, we received the training materials used and we took photos of the various program spaces. The researcher would then edit the observational notes for clarity and post them in a shared drive on a protected server.

The observational data allowed us to understand aspects of the programs that staff and instructors may take for granted. For example, the staff rarely spoke about the importance of physical space in their interviews; however, we observed how dedicated study and social spaces allowed students in the program to develop relational connections with each other and staff members. After observing these spaces, we then asked the staff more about their thinking related to space. Related to this article, the observational data were the primary mode of understanding the norms and culture that shaped program implementation.

Interviews

The lead researcher for each site conducted interviews with program staff, instructors, and stakeholders (see Appendix B). We interviewed 26 staff members with the program directors being interviewed multiple times for a total of 42 interviews. It is important to note that the composition of the staff is diverse in terms of race and gender. Many of the staff also came from low-income and first-generation college backgrounds. Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 min. In addition, we conducted informal interviews when we interacted with program staff during our site visits to gain a better understanding of what we observed. For example, after observing a program event we might meet with a staff member to ask follow-up questions about the goals of the event and if they thought it was successful. We interviewed 28 instructors who taught courses in the program, which also included a faculty coordinator for each campus. Each faculty interview lasted approximately 30–45 min. Finally, we interviewed stakeholders on each campus who did not work for the program, but collaborated with them to support students (e.g., counseling, financial aid, and housing). These stakeholders represent different environments in ecological validation, and typically collaborated with TSLC staff and faculty to support students in the mesosystem. In addition, we interviewed the administrative lead (e.g., vice provost) who oversaw the program staff at each campus. We interviewed 29 stakeholders; each interview lasted approximately 30–60 min. In total, we completed 103 interviews with 83 participants who were familiar with the programs. The interviews were digitally recorded, professionally transcribed, and stored in a protected server.

Analysis

We utilized a constant comparative method of analysis to develop individual case studies of each campus. We developed a case study template that drew from previous research related to higher education culture (e.g., drawing on Tierney, 1988 and Kuh & Hall, 1993 frameworks), which enabled us to organize the large amount of data related to cultural elements, including leadership, norms, language and communication, socialization, training, rituals, and spaces. As we began analyzing the data, we identified subcategories (e.g., leader sets the tone and the norms) that allowed for deeper analysis related to the culture. Finally, the template included space to explore how each cultural element supported ecological validation. We also looked for data that illustrated when the culture had been violated since those moments can allow for understanding how individuals enact the underlying cultural norms.

After we completed the case studies of each campus, we developed a cross-campus case study that focused on the shared themes as well as distinctive aspects of each campus approach. During initial cross-case analysis, the lead researcher at each campus presented the data and their understanding of the campus culture. The three other researchers asked for clarifications and pushed back if they disagreed. After the process was concluded, we captured shared themes across campuses and any meaningful differences, which led to an initial understanding of the concepts presented in this article. We then went back to the data to look for confirming and disconfirming evidence of the culture of ecological validation. The multiple case study approach enabled us to understand the norms that shaped the program culture. While we explored for differences, especially since these were three different institutional types and context, the differences did not seem germane to the overall construct being explored.

Trustworthiness and Positionality

Drawing from the work of Lincoln and Guba (1986), we employed multiple forms of trustworthiness: member-checking, prolonged engagement, and triangulation. We often shared emerging findings with the program staff to get their feedback, including a formal presentation of findings each fall. Their insights were utilized as additional data in understanding the program structures and culture. The 5-year time frame of the study allowed for prolonged engagement with staff and stakeholders as well as the ability to observe the program over time. As we continued to engage with participants, they felt more comfortable sharing the challenges they experienced. We leveraged multiple forms of triangulation: methodological, participant perspectives, and theoretical (Mathison, 1988). The comprehensive design of the study allowed for multiple forms of qualitative data to be gathered, including observations, interviews, and documents. Using the case study approach, we brought together those data without privileging one form of data over another. Having participants with different positions within the program (e.g., staff member, director, instructor, and faculty coordinator) as well as those outside the program (e.g., counseling, financial aid, housing, and administration) allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of the culture that would have been more difficult to assess with just one perspective. And, bringing together multiple theoretical frameworks within our analysis gave us an opportunity to explore the program culture from various perspectives.

The qualitative research team was racially diverse (three of the six main researchers were scholars of color; five of six graduate students were students of color) and many also identified as first-generation in college and from low-income backgrounds (four of the six main researchers; five of the six graduate students). The team reflected on their positionality and used it to help enhance our interpretation and understanding of the data during meetings to discuss the article and our emerging findings.

Presentation of Data

TSLC programs created and sustained a culture of ecological validation that involved six norms (holistic, proactive, strengths-oriented, identity-conscious, collaborative, and reflective practice) that are embedded through five structures and processes. The norms, structures/processes, and their interaction and outcomes are illustrated in Appendix C.

The first four norms focus on the interactions between educators and students. The *holistic* norm considered all aspects of a student's background, identities (e.g., race, gender, and sexuality), personality, goals, and academic and interpersonal experiences in college when connecting them with resources and opportunities. The *proactive* norm placed the onus on institutional agents to regularly reach out to students to build relationships, address challenges and identify opportunities. The *strengths-oriented* norm focused on the cultural assets, talents and skills, previous successes, and personality traits that students bring with them to campus and not employing a deficit approach, which focuses primarily on the assumed challenges that at-promise college students may face. The *identity-conscious* norm to student support is intentionally designed with students' identities in mind—with acute attention to the identities of those students from underserved (e.g., at-promise) backgrounds. The final two norms involve creating an environment at the mesolevel that enabled educators to enact the holistic, proactive, and strengths-oriented practices. The *collaborative* norm explores ways to build connections across various campus services and programs to create integrated and reinforcing validating experiences across a student's ecology of support. The *reflective practice* involved continually considering how students, staff, and leadership experienced the program in order to make shifts necessary to improve student success. The reflective process used both formal and informal data to inform decision-making. As a result of this reflective practice, the staff and faculty often made adjustments to tailor the program to fit the specific needs of racialized minorities, first-generation students, or commuter and working students, for example[6] (Kezar et al., 2021).

These norms were operationalized throughout the program structures and processes. Our research identified five areas (leadership, socialization, language, space and communication, ritual and traditions, working relationships and interactions) that were most commonly identified both through observation and interview data as locations for communicating and embedding the norms. The leadership set the expectation that validation was a central tenet of the program. Mentors, instructors, and staff were hired based upon their potential to fit within the culture and then socialized how to enact the validating culture in their practice. The language, space, and communication used within the program sent validating messages to students. The rituals and traditions sustained the culture over time. And the working relationships and interactions enabled the program leadership and staff to identify additional resources and opportunities to support at-promise student success.

The sections that follow demonstrate how those norms were threaded throughout the program culture across three different college campuses (e.g., rural, metropolitan, and research-oriented) and we include the norms in italics throughout the sections to highlight how they were enacted. We document how these norms underlie the culture of ecological validation—due to space limitations, not every section reviews all six norms.

Leadership

Although the director set the tone for the program, responsibility for creating validating experiences was distributed among various individuals such as faculty coordinators and senior administrators. Staff, instructors, and peer mentors were expected to engage in holistic, proactive, strengths-oriented, reflective, and identity-conscious practices that affirmed students' academic potential. One program director had staff members read research articles in order to remain informed about promising practices. When discussing an article about validation theory at one of the staff meetings, the director stated, "validation is all we do." She then asked the staff members to spend 15 min considering how the program could create more affirming experiences for students as well as identifying any students who may be slipping through the cracks (*reflective practice*). Staff members identified a few areas they wanted to tailor programming supports: LGBTQ+ students raised in conservative families who may benefit from having discussions about how to access counseling on campus; exploring how to support Black and Muslim students who felt uncomfortable on campus after a few racial incidents occurred; and examining the subgroup of first-generation college students who ended up on academic probation each year to understand how to support them (*identity-conscious*). The remainder of the meeting was spent sharing both successes and challenges in working with students as well as brainstorming all the ways (*holistic*) the program could provide additional tailored support to students who were struggling and connect students experiencing success with opportunities to extend their learning.

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[6] Two articles from the project focus on this process of tailoring which is similar to being conscious of culture or identity as is noted in Museus's CECE model (Kezar et al., 2021). The data around the process of tailoring are too extensive to include in this article. But it is the culture of ecological validation that results in the tailoring process. And as the examples will illustrate, tailoring is even more extensive than being identity-conscious to include awareness of students' unique backgrounds and circumstances including working, being a parent, and the like.

Directors created the expectation that validation started soon after the student got awarded the scholarship and continued until they completed the 2-year support program. Each student received a phone call soon after earning the scholarship from one of the staff members in order to individually congratulate the student for earning the scholarship, to learn more about the student, and to see if there were any questions or concerns as the students prepared for college. One of the programs had its own orientation the weekend before classes started. The director began the event with a mantra that she often repeated, "who are you, what are you doing, and why are you doing it" (*holistic*). She explained how all aspects of the student mattered to the program staff, instructors, and mentors. All three programs engaged in similar activities related to early contact with individual students. The directors across the campuses required staff, mentors, and instructors to know students by name and build trusting relationships with the students they served.

The directors expected the staff to engage with data to make informed decisions about how to support students. At one campus, the director recognized that students placed in the entry-level college math course were completing at low rates and the staff were consistently hearing from students that they needed more support in order to successfully complete the course (*reflective practice*). The director met with the math department on campus (*collaborative*) to explore potential solutions that could offer additional support for students while also creating a validating experience. Within the shared academic courses, the program worked with the math department to pilot expanding the math course to include an additional unit that offered supplemental instruction and tutoring. After running the course a few times, the program and math department determined that students in this format consistently performed at a higher rate than those without supplemental support. As a result, the entire campus shifted to that format. The programs consistently considered what was working and were open to letting go of things that did not prove successful (*reflective practice*). As another program director explained, "we have a lot of varied perspectives, but we all have experience with the community, so nobody gets offended about tweaking things." Across the three campuses, the directors set the expectation that instructors and staff should consistently explore ways to improve the program and ensure that all students have validating experiences in every aspect of the program. In addition, the senior administrators at each campus worked with the programs to help facilitate connections with other programs, services, and supports on campus for at-promise students. In meetings with the TSLC director and staff, the administrators brainstormed ways to create bridges between TSLC and other student affairs and academic affairs programs and services in order to provide support for students that was identity-conscious and holistic (e.g., connections to the career center, multicultural center, LGBTQ offices).

Another key program leadership role was the faculty coordinator who was crucial in communicating the norms and embedding them in the practices adopted by TSLC instructors as part of ecological validation. The faculty coordinator tells the instructors that it is important to be "relatable" and to leverage opportunities to get to know who students are because these are key ingredients of what makes someone a successful instructor in the program (*holistic*). Moreover, they communicate with instructors during their regular meeting that it is important that they communicate to students early on that they are "concerned parties in their education" who care about their success (*proactive*) and that instructors should work with them—the faculty coordinator—and the program director to share information about student issues, whatever they may be, so that they can work together to proactively reach out and support the student as needed because it "helps with retention" (*proactive and collaborative*). Finally, the faculty coordinator communicated the importance of being cognizant of students' identities and past experiences and to think about how to leverage students' strengths to help them achieve success. For instance, one faculty member commented on how the faculty coordinator would communicate to instructors "how important it was that you understand that these students had some real-life challenges, not to be easier, but just to be aware" when working with them and supporting their learning (*identity-conscious*).

The staff at the UNL campus each had an area of specialization/collaboration and through these areas, they were expected to play a role in communicating the norms to other offices they worked with. For example, one of the staff members worked closely with study abroad to learn about opportunities available for students and in those interactions also shared ways the office could be more validating (*proactive and collaborative*). Another staff member coordinated with counseling and mental health services, and helped them understand the background of at-promise students and how they were sometimes hesitant to use their services (*identity-conscious*). In terms of peer mentors, they were encouraged to bring ideas for improvement to the staff. For example, the mentors reorganized how the Study Cafe was structured to make it easier for students to find and approach tutors (*proactive*). This included developing nametags with the tutor's name and area of specialty because they heard that students did not know who the tutors were or which person to talk to.

Socialization

In terms of socialization, faculty were provided ongoing opportunities to learn about ecological validation. At the beginning of each term, training sessions were offered where faculty were notified about the assets and needs of at-promise students (*strengths-oriented*). For example, faculty were reminded that at-promise students tended to have other responsibilities outside of the classroom and faculty were encouraged to be flexible with students due to these obligations (*identity-conscious and holistic*). This training included bringing in previous instructors who could provide examples of how they enacted the culture and how that positively influences student outcomes (*reflective practice*). Throughout the semester, regular breakfasts were established where faculty can talk about any issues that are emerging in classes and brainstorm solutions (*reflective practice*). Staff coordinated the breakfast and provide resources for faculty about support programs and reinforced how faculty can connect students to valuable resources that will make them successful (*collaborative*). Many of the sessions also provided data and research about key topics ranging from the experiences of first-generation college students to how to teach in culturally responsive ways (*identity-conscious*). Faculty coordinators created tip sheets to reinforce what was focused on in training that explained how to create validating experiences for students, including knowing their names, starting classes with questions and updates, asking them about their backgrounds and identities, encouraging active learning, and suggesting instructors linger after class in order to speak with students (*holistic, identity-conscious, proactive*). The faculty coordinator also reviewed feedback from students. If an instructor did not demonstrate the ability to meet the expectations of the program, the coordinator would not invite them back to teach again (*reflective practice*).

Directors created training for staff members that included both orienting them to multiple resources and opportunities within the program and on campus as well as socialization related to enacting the program culture. Many of the staff members were early career professionals who eventually left the program to pursue advancement opportunities. At one of the campuses, we observed training since five staff members were hired during the 4 years of data collection. The director utilized a coaching approach that involved new staff members observing her interacting with a student and then engaging in a conversation with the staff members after the student left (*reflective practice*). She began by asking what the staff members saw and then she explained why she made the specific decisions for this student. In one situation, the staff observed two student meetings and one of the staff members asked why the director pushed one student more than the other. The director explained how staff need to approach a student experiencing anxiety related to a potential serious issue with a boyfriend differently than a high achieving student who feels stress related to taking on a leadership position (*identity-conscious*). After a couple of weeks, the director then switched roles and observed the staff member interacting with students before engaging in a debrief. The director consistently affirmed the importance of considering all aspects of a student's experiences (*holistic*), acknowledging their successes and goals (*strengths-based*), considering all aspects of their identity (*identity-conscious*), and considering multiple options for support that may be offered by the program or across campus (*collaborative*). In addition, the entire staff attended the diversity conference hosted by the university each year that focused on how to support students with differing identities and backgrounds. The staff would then reflect on what they learned. For example, they decided to incorporate more discussions about race in their events after one of the conferences (*identity-conscious*).

Peer mentor training at each campus began over the summer and continued throughout the academic year. In addition, peer mentors were assigned to a staff member who served as their point of contact for individual development (*reflective practice*). At one of the campuses, the staff and peer mentors went to a retreat center for 4 days to engage in extensive training related to the program culture and expectations. While peer mentors received a lot of information related to resources and program structures, the majority of the time was spent role playing how to engage with students in ways that addressed the multiple issues students may face (*holistic*), understanding how to work with students with different backgrounds and identities (*identity-conscious*), how to build upon their mentees' successes (*strengths-based*), and the importance of establishing a trusting relationship with students. Mentors were held accountable for enacting a culture of validation. At one of the mentor trainings early in the spring semester, the director started by saying "I have been receiving reports that not all mentors have been doing 1:1 s [individual student meetings] or the 1:1 s are quick and cold," she paused, "we need to clean that up, that is not what we do." She then affirmed the importance of these individual meetings by sharing examples of students reporting how they have been supported by their peer mentor and then asking the mentors to share how they have been organizing the meetings to support students who may have a wide range of experiences on campus.

The program leaders were very intentional in selecting staff members, instructors, and peer mentors based on their potential to fit within the culture of ecological validation. Staff members were hired based upon their ability and/or potential to enact the norms, instructors were selected to teach classes based upon their commitment to support at-promise students, and peer mentors were chosen based upon their potential to support other students. For example, each of the programs included peer mentors who had been on academic probation and utilized support provided by staff members in order to broaden the idea of academic success (*holistic*). In addition, one of the programs made the decision to select math graduate students who were studying math pedagogy to teach the entry-level courses because they could more easily explain basic concepts than professors who researched sophisticated and abstract concepts. The program staff were also conscious of selecting individuals who represented the diversity of the students in the program, including race/ethnicity, first-generation in college, urban and rural, and gender identity, sex and sexuality (*identity-conscious*). As much as possible, the directors wanted the students to see themselves represented within the staff, instructors, and/or peer mentors.

Language, Space, and Communication

The programs carefully considered how they engaged with students. Across the three campuses, the term "scholars" was used to identify the students (*strengths-oriented*). In addition, the program was associated with a public figure (Warren Buffett) who had both local and international success. Being a "Buffett Scholar" was consistently associated with academic success. The programs ensured this was more than just semantics as they structured the program to support students' academic potential.

The programs consistently used language associated with care. For example, students often spoke about TSLC as their "family" at the campuses. The directors made comments like "you are my heart," "I love you," and "we are here for you" when speaking to the students at group events. At one campus, the program commissioned a TSLC student to design a large mural that was painted on the wall of the program space. The mural featured the TSLC logo and used words such as "family," "inclusive," "community," "friendship," "opportunities," "resources," and "succeed"—terms intended to communicate that this is everyone's "home" and students from all backgrounds can be successful. The programs also emailed newsletters and posted them on social media as additional ways to send validating messages to students. When talking with students individually, the directors encouraged the staff to send the message that they were invested in supporting the student's individual success. The directors believed this language of care that exceeded simply focusing on grades (*holistic*) was an important aspect of creating a culture of ecological validation for at-promise students.

Physical space was used to communicate that students belonged on campus and to highlight their successes. One program had nearly an entire floor of a building on campus dedicated to its students and staff. In addition to the staff and faculty coordinator offices, the program also had a quiet study room, computer room with free printing, hangout room, and lounge in the front office (*holistic*). All the rooms and hallways had validating messages related to potential opportunities and previous successes. For example, each year a student was selected to design the planner which also got displayed on the wall in the lobby for the staff offices. The hallways included multiple boards with chalk, Legos, and magnetic words that students could use to post their feelings, messages, and ideas. This campus served a large number of commuter students. The structure of the space sent a message that they had a place to go even if they did not need help. The space was theirs to occupy and connect with staff, instructors, mentors, and peers. Another campus had the office located on the first floor of the residence hall where the first-year students lived. Students knew they could stop by anytime to ask questions or just to connect with a staff member, including the days that they gave out free popcorn to encourage students to come by. Outside of the office was a lounge area where students could study or socialize. All three campuses also coordinated with other centers on campus to ensure that all students found spaces on campus where they felt welcomed and validated (*collaborative*).

Program directors were also careful to address times when this norm was violated. For example, at the program orientation for one of the campuses, mentors were expected to briefly introduce themselves including their name, hometown, major, and one activity (which included clubs, work, community service, or hobby.) A White female mentor ended by throwing her hands in the air and saying "I've been living the thug life." The director met with the mentor right after the event to explain why this culturally inappropriate language did not fit with the culture of the program and may be offensive to some of the racially minoritized students (*identity-conscious*). The next mentor training included a discussion of culturally sensitive language that built upon what had been presented during the initial mentor training.

Rituals and Traditions

To both cultivate and maintain the program's culture, TSLC leadership, staff, and faculty created rituals and traditions that reflected their collective commitments to holistic and strength-based approaches to education. By implementing rituals and traditions they created multiple environments where validating practices occurred on a regular basis so that they became normalized and were built into the fabric of how the program operates. For example, first-year seminar meetings opened with "happies and crappies" or "highs and lows" where all members of the course, including the instructor, shared an academic or personal success and a challenge they had experienced over the past week (*holistic*). By cocreating space to share information about oneself, TSLC staff normalized celebrating successes and struggling during college. Furthermore, they created opportunities to help students realize they were not alone and affirm their abilities to achieve their goals and negotiate challenges. Notably, the practice of sharing "happies and crappies" was used in TSLC staff and mentor meetings, which created opportunities to validate the experiences of TSLC staff and student leaders.

TSLC staff used rituals and traditions to publicly recognize students' achievements and validate their abilities to succeed. One campus had a recognition reception each semester that acknowledged TSLC students' academic achievements (e.g., Chancellor's list, securing internships), leadership positions, and campus awards (*strength-based*). Notably, students were encouraged to bring family or other support systems to this reception to celebrate alongside them (*holistic*).

Two campuses hosted events to recognize students' completion of their first 2 years of college. The campus that called this event their Second Year Experience (SYE) Launch did so with the idea that they were "launching" students out of their formal time in TSLC and into their academic major homes. To facilitate these connections to academic departments, the TSLC faculty coordinator and staff worked with deans and department chairs (*collaborative)* to ensure that instructors and academic leaders were present to meet with students in small groups and welcome them into their college and major. At the SYE Launch, students also received a campus insignia pin and were told by staff, this pin is symbolic of "the journey that you are on, that you belong here, and that you'll complete your degrees." This message affirming students' capacities to succeed (*strength-based*) was reinforced at the program's college graduation ceremonies. At this event, students were individually recognized in front of their families and guests (*holistic*); they received a medal to wear to university-wide graduation as a reminder of their accomplishments and connection to TSLC. Efforts to publicly validate students' experiences and recognize their accomplishments occurred throughout their time in the program.

Relationships and Working Interactions

The culture of ecological validation was supported by TSLC building relationships that reflected the norms in working with each other, across campus, and in all their working interactions. Directors set the expectation that staff and instructors need to collaborate within the office and across the broader campus to maximize their efforts to support student success and more fully address student needs—acknowledging that students are capable of success when educators work together toward that goal (*collaborative*). As one director noted, "just the culture of our office ... we have a very collaborative nature as a team." TSLC staff proactively built relationships with students and learned about their multiple identities/cultures, needs and goals, which allowed the staff to collectively reflect on any trends that emerged (*reflective practice*) and then utilize the relationships they had built with other student support offices on campus to create lines of communication, facilitate addressing students' needs, and more readily connect students to opportunities in the broader campus community (*proactive*). At one campus, the program recognized that many of their Latinx students had distinctive needs based on work commitments and family dynamics that they felt required an additional layer of support. In response, the director connected to the office of diversity and inclusion on campus to coordinate support for the program's Latinx students in a way that met their multiple needs and was also culturally responsive (*identity-conscious*).

Staff commonly discussed how they consistently worked with partners to share information about students, their needs, and learning opportunities to create an environment where students can readily access informed support services. Their intention in doing this was described by one staff member as to "encourage [students] to build bridges." This staff member went on to comment how by working with other offices on campus, they connected students "with the different pieces that are on campus that can [enrich their lives] according to their individual needs and experiences" (*holistic*), so students saw "that we really care about them and their success. It's not just them getting the degree." They connected students to others on campus with the goal of transitioning them to support on the broader campus once they completed the 2-year program in order to maximize their success in college.

Proactive efforts to work across domains of student support enabled the culture of ecological validation to permeate multiple spaces where students were supported ranging from classes, multicultural center, TRIO program, writing center, academic services, honors programs, financial aid, LGBTQ+ programs, and counseling center on campus—creating a collaborative network of holistic support that the staff can utilize to readily connect at-promise students to in order to meet their multiple needs and support their success (*holistic* and *identity-conscious*). Using both formal and informal channels of communication, these relationships enabled staff to tailor their support to at-promise students' individual needs and strengths and to identify opportunities to promote their success and remove barriers. For instance, TSLC at one campus collaborated with TRIO and several other student support offices that served low-income and racially minoritized students in order to proactively connect at-promise students to a holistic range of resources, including the study abroad office, graduate school and preprofessional opportunities, career advising support, and the undergraduate research office (*proactive* and *identity-conscious*). One undergirding motivation for this effort to work across offices was that at-promise students were just as interested in many of the same learning opportunities as their more privileged peers (*strengths-oriented*), and it was a matter of proactively connecting students to these opportunities and removing barriers to their success—such as the lack of adequate institutional communication about the existence of these opportunities for all students *(proactive*).

Discussion

As illustrated above, a culture of ecological validation centers the experiences, strengths, and needs of at-promise students within the norms—holistic, proactive, strengths-oriented, identity-conscious, collaborative, and reflective practice. The defining feature of a culture of ecological validation is the enactment of the six norms that are translated into key structures and processes (e.g., leadership; socialization; language, spaces, and communication; rituals and traditions; and, relationships and working interactions) and then further embedded into staff, faculty, and paraprofessional activities, policy and practices. Through embedding the norms into key structures and processes, they become omnipresent. Unlike programs that attempt to change students or only select students who appear to be ready for college, a culture of ecological validation focuses on norms that allow them to be student ready—meaning the program or institution adjusts to serve at-promise students instead of primarily focusing on changing the students (McNair et al., 2016).[7] In addition, the culture encouraged leadership, staff, and instructors toward building relationships that reflected the norms instead of departmental silos that competed against each other and focused on bureaucratic aspects of the organization instead of holistically considering how to support students.

One of the main contributions of this study is empirically documenting a culture that supports at-promise students and is focused on their needs rather than White, middle-class values. This study identified a way to scale validation to support large numbers of at-promise college students who are low income, many of whom are first-generation in college and racially minoritized, in ways that have not been identified in previous literature. It is important to note that the culture was found at three very different campuses—a research university, rural comprehensive, and urban commuter campus. Thus, the norms seem transferable and applicable to most higher education contexts. Rendón (1994) hypothesized structures or culture could be created to ensure students experience validation throughout their experience, but did not articulate an approach. The six norms we document (holistic, proactive, strengths-oriented, identity-conscious, collaborative, and reflective) and the way they are embedded into institutional structures and processes of leadership, socialization, rituals and the like illuminate the ways campuses can scale validation. The norms also become important avenues for articulating and implementing validation in the work of faculty, staff, and peer mentors. Each norm operates in conjunction with the others to create the overall culture of ecological validation and any single norm alone would not be enough to create the overall environment. For example, being proactive without being strengths based would not create the culture needed to support at-promise students. These findings also support recent studies about the lack of belonging and support felt by first-generation and low-income students (Bettencourt, 2019; Martin, 2015; Means & Pyne, 2017).

Additionally, Museus (2011) hypothesized a culture (CECE) to support racially diverse students but also did not have empirical examples of this approach. Our study identified empirically an environment very similar to Museus's model—a humanizing education environment in which care is communicated and where proactive and holistic support are the norms.

Implications for Practice

Our study goes beyond the CECE model in focusing on the ways that practitioners create an environment supportive of at-promise students, since the CECE is based on students' experience. The reflective practice critical to serving students from diverse backgrounds and which led to faculty and staff tailoring the program is an important norm not identified in earlier work like CECE. And the collaboration necessary across units and supports is also another important norm for practitioners that has not been highlighted as supporting at-promise students in previous work. While CECE described what a supportive culture feels like for students, our study identifies the specific structures, processes, and norms necessary among faculty and staff to be able to create an environment supportive of at-promise students.

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[7] It is important to note that the size of this program is close to the size of many liberal arts and community colleges suggesting a culture that has been scaled. These campuses were large universities and it was not scaled to the overall institution; however, the findings have implications for scaled interventions more generally at smaller size institutions and this approach can likely be used across even larger environments.

Our study also expands on the CECE model's attention to being identity-conscious. Our study identified a process called tailoring (see Kezar et al., 2020, 2021) that modifies interventions and support based on specific student needs, often related to their identities and cultural background, but are broader than this and also entail their experiences and situations such as working, commuting, family responsibilities among other issues that are addressed through the tailoring process. The tailoring process is similar to case management where students' multiple identities and needs are assessed and addressed.[8] Thus, our study confirms the importance of being identity-conscious as noted in the CECE model, but also attending to other aspects of students' backgrounds, experiences, personalities, and goals that go beyond ethnicity and/or race.

Without the level of detail provided in this article, creating the structures and culture to support at-promise students at scale has been elusive. A culture of ecological validation builds on a few emerging studies, such as Little et al. (2018) and Museus (2011), that begin to outline the aspects of culture that need attention, but provides more detail through the norms. Many scholars have pointed to the need for and importance of scaled supports. Since campuses have largely not been doing this work, it has been hard to capture—thus the importance of this unique program and case study. Because our case study involved a large-scale program that serves a sizable number of students, we were able to provide an evidence-based model suggesting this approach works at scale, and could work at an even larger (e.g., institutional) scale. The evidence we present in this study provides the impetus to explore implementation of the culture of ecological validation at even broader institutional scale.

This case study shows how the six norms help create a culture of ecological validation by having leaders that embody the norms and communicates them to all staff and faculty working with students. The norms are used to socialize faculty, staff, and peer mentors as well as translated into the way spaces are developed and engaged, rituals that are hallmarks of the programmatic experience, and language and communication used by staff, faculty, and peer mentors. These rituals, language and communication, and spaces then support validation in an ongoing way. The description offered helps demonstrate the way the six norms work in concert and provides a vision for campus practitioners to create a culture of ecological validation.

Implications for Future Research

Because this is one of the first studies to document a culture that supports a diverse group of at-promise students, there is a need to explore this concept in other settings (e.g., community colleges, minority-serving institutions, and elite private colleges) even though it was found at three very different institutional types. Studies could be done with other subgroups of at-promise students (e.g., our sample had few Native American students) to understand their experiences within a culture of ecological validation. Also, it might be important to examine different regions of the country as we know there are often regional differences related to student populations and social conventions (Kezar, 2018). Also, we studied a very large and scaled program, but not an overall university that had been transformed to a culture of ecological validation. Future research should examine this phenomenon at the overall institutional level. Understanding these various layers of transferability appears to be an important next step. Finally, we focused on the more immediate college environments in our study given that Bronfenbrenner (1994) argued these have the most direct effect on student success. However, future studies might explore the indirect effects of more distal contexts, such as state policy contexts, and their role (if any) in developing and sustaining a culture of ecological validation.

Decades of small, fragmented, and myriad programs have failed to support at-promise students. Foundations, policymakers, and campus leaders register frustration with the lack of progress on this issue. New approaches are needed and campuses cannot continue on with the status quo of failing at-promise students. This article provides evidence for one innovation that shows potential to address this issue—a culture of ecological validation. Most importantly it provides a roadmap for educators to create and sustain such a culture.

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[8] The reflective practice that we document in this article leads to tailoring is expanded upon in other articles (Kezar et al., 2021) from this project.

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Appendix A

Characteristics of TSLC Students (All Campuses)

Characteristic	% or *M*
Expected family contribution	$2451.92
First generation[a]	69%
Racially minoritized	46%
Black	8%
Asian	7%
Latinx	26%
Multiracial	5%
White	53%

[a] Neither parent holds a bachelor's degree or higher. TSLC = Thompson scholar learning community. Numbers may not add to 100 due to rounding.

Appendix B

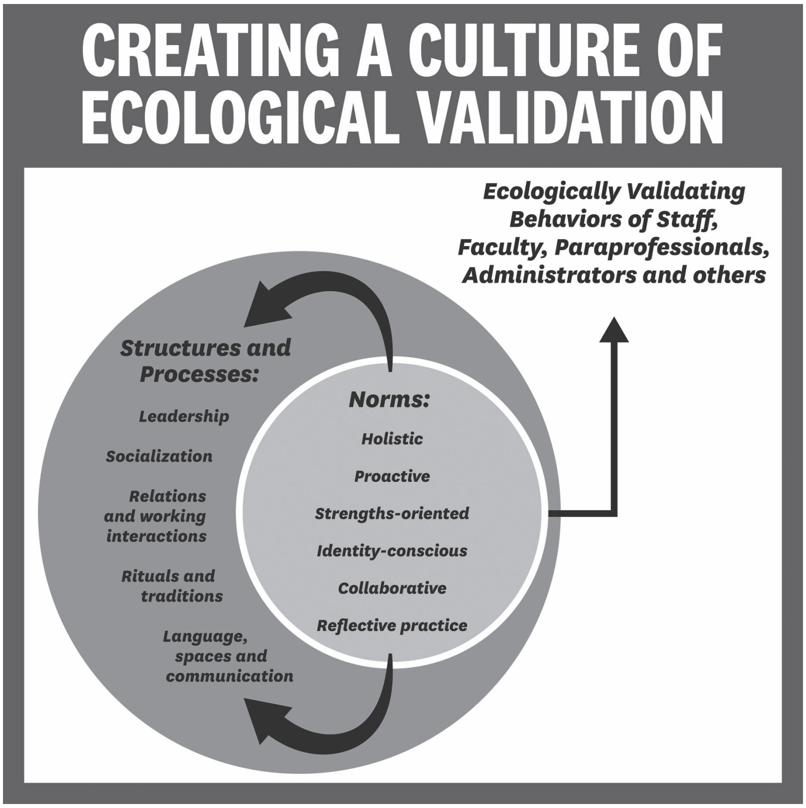
Participant Demographic Information

Role	# of people	# of interviews	Men	Women	Trans or nonbinary	White	Racially minoritized	Unsure of race
Staff	26	42—several individuals were interviewed more than once	8	17	1	15	11	0
Instructor	28	29	13	15	0	23	4	1
Stakeholder	29	32	15	14	0	23	6	0
Total	83	103	36	46	1	61	21	1

(*Appendices continue*)

Appendix C

Diagram of a Culture of Ecological Validation


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
Identity-conscious
Collaborative
Reflective practice

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