

# **Student Success Coaching:** A Holistic Approach to Retention

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University of Nebraska at Kearney

# This Session

Explore a comprehensive coaching model designed to support first-year college students holistically, addressing their academic, social and personal needs.

By tailoring mentorship, emotional support and academic guidance to meet students where they are, we can create a more inclusive and effective transition to college life.

Attendees will learn strategies to foster self-awareness, critical thinking and resilience in freshmen, building meaningful connections that enhance student success and retention.

Discover practical approaches that empower first-year students and lay a foundation for their long-term well-being and achievement.

# Who I Am



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- 30+ years in public education
- 2 years in higher education
- Student Success Coaching Model
- Freshmen Foundations Course
- 1:1 sessions
- CRM data collection/freshmen trends

# Who We Are

- Division II Public Residential University
- Kearney, Nebraska
- 3 Colleges:
  - Arts and Sciences
  - Education
  - Business and Technology



**5,881**

STUDENTS  
FROM

**92**

OF 93 NEBRASKA  
COUNTIES

**47**

STATES

**58**

COUNTRIES

**13%**

first-time  
freshmen  
are from  
outside of  
Nebraska

**290**

largest number  
of international  
students in 5  
years; largest  
group, Japan (108)

**296**

new  
transfer  
students

**1**

OF NEARLY **7**  
students are Hispanic – UNK's  
largest minority population



**1**

OF **4**  
undergraduate  
students are of color



UNK is one of four Nebraska members in the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities. In 2024, 14.9% of first-time freshmen at UNK are Hispanic.

**43%**

of undergraduate  
students are the first  
generation in their  
families to go to college

**3.5**

average high school  
GPA of freshmen  
students

# What's Your WHY?



# WHAT are your takeaways?

- How to use a holistic approach to building relationships with students
- How to use data in your CRM to drive student decisions
- How to affirm your students in every interaction, syllabus, and policy



# BARRIERS

- No office, no team, no leadership
- Selecting students
- Caseload first and second year
- Scaling to fit needs
- Money

# Overcoming Obstacles

- Student fees vs. tuition increase
- 4 days into job
- E.V. book club
- Learning campus resources
- Building cross-campus relationships



# USC Research With University of Nebraska

# PASS

Promoting At-Promise Student Success


KEY FINDINGS

RESEARCH

PRACTICE

ABOUT  
TEAM

METHODOLOGY  
NEWS & EVENTS



## Promoting At-Promise Student Success

The Promoting At-Promise Student Success Project (PASS) Project is a multi-year mixed-methods research project at the USC Pullias Center for Higher Education dedicated to deepening understandings of student success in postsecondary institutions through the study of the Thompson Scholars Learning Communities (TSLC) program at three University of Nebraska campuses. It is our hope that findings will be helpful in informing higher educational institutional practice and policy.



# The Loper Success Hub

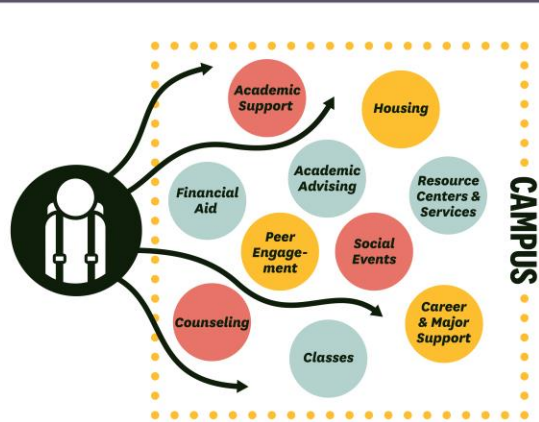
Providing a holistic approach to student learning & support

- Academic Advising and Career Development
- Disability Services for Students
- First-Generation Student Support
- Kearney Bound Scholars
- TRIO-Student Support Services
- Tutoring and Academic Support

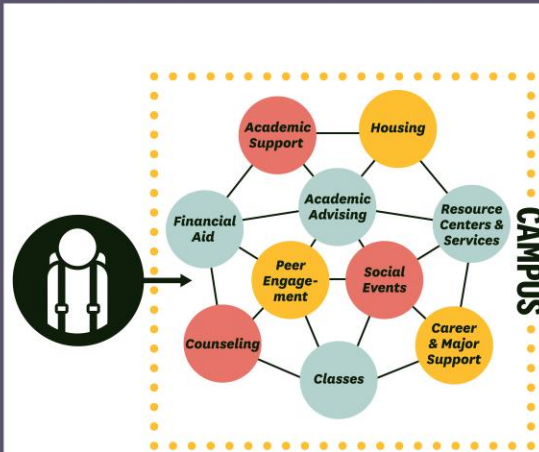


**Ecological Validation** moves away from silo approaches and focuses on shifting university culture toward a more collaborative and cohesive approach to support at-promise student experiences and outcomes.

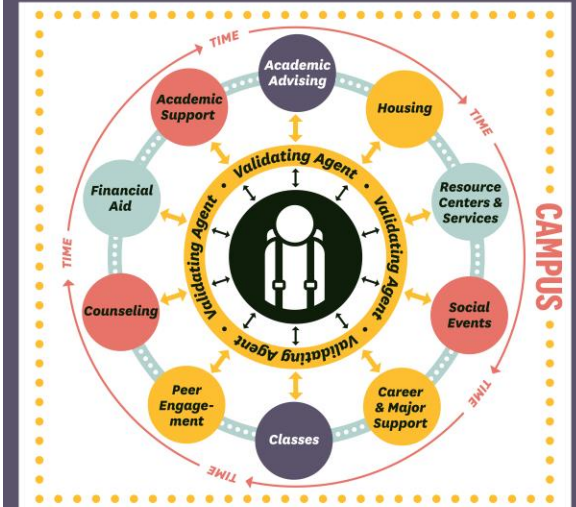
### TRADITIONAL CAMPUS: SILOS OF STUDENT SUPPORT



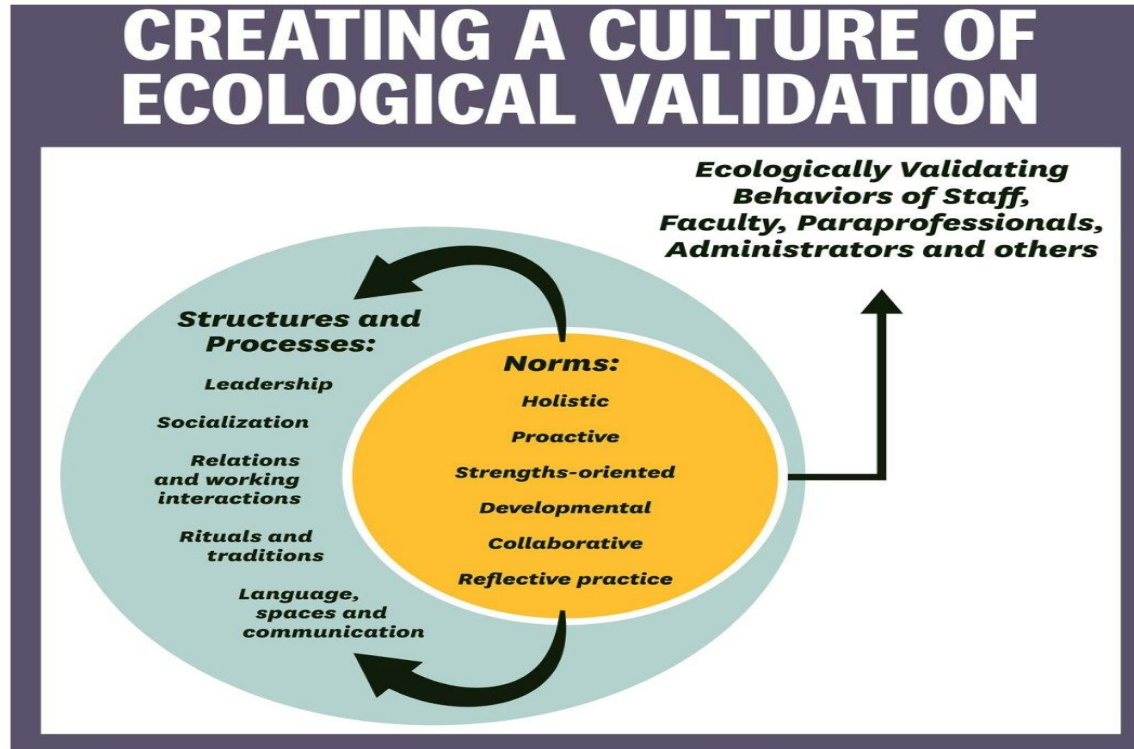
### ECOLOGY OF STUDENT SUPPORT



### ECOLOGICAL VALIDATION



# The Six E.V. Norms



# NORMS OF ECOLOGICAL VALIDATION

## ***Interactions with Students***

- ***Strengths-oriented***
- ***Holistic***
- ***Proactive***
- ***Developmental***

## ***Validating Educators***

## ***Interactions Among Educators***

- ***Reflective***
- ***Collaborative and  
Cross-functional***

How we  
interact with  
our students

How we  
interact with  
our colleagues

# Holistic

## In Recruitment

- Work to understand why students have selected particular majors; many students are influenced by factors like finances and family
- Provide flexibility with students/families who may have financial or language barriers; what can we do to change policies or practices to make coming to UNK more accessible?
- Schedule campus visits and new student enrollment days that consider family needs, commitments, and financial realities

## In Retention

- Learn about the responsibilities students have beyond academics to help them navigate priorities
- Regularly ask students about their lives: How is your family? How is your wellness? Tell me about a recent success.
- Create and carry out events that are rituals and/or traditions which allow students to include family members or other supporters

# Proactive

## In Recruitment

- Assess possible challenges for students through early interactions, and help those students make the right connections on our campus for resources
- Hire staff with varied backgrounds so they can share their personal success stories as they recruit students to UNK
- Create department materials with authentic messaging and images that communicate values that will connect with at-risk students

## In Retention

- Using language in emails that communicates concern and care to build bridges, rather than deficit-based messaging that builds barriers or creates shame for students
- Find out what student interests are through intentionally scheduled interactions (example: 15-minute meetings) and connect them with organizations, faculty, high impact practices
- Assume institutional responsibility for telling all students about high impact practices and experiential learning; remove barriers for student engagement

# Strength-Oriented

## In Recruitment

- During meetings with faculty while students visit campus, ask students questions about their talents, skills, and interest in UNK; show interest in learning about them
- During new student enrollment, ask students about their goals and what experiences they have already had that have them interested in a major or career; ask about family support too
- Feature at-promise students and alumni in your marketing materials, where they can share their genuine success stories to connect with prospective students

## In Retention

- Recognize student successes using social media, handwritten notes, ceremonies; continually affirm their ability to succeed in the higher education environment
- Incorporate student voices, perspectives, and talents into classrooms discussions, departmental events, and committees; prioritizing student driven ideas and lived experiences showcases their values and contributions to UNK
- Attend regular professional development trainings to challenge deficit-based perspectives and learn about the assets of at-promise students



# Developmental

## In Recruitment

- Consider how we communicate about and provide placement tests to students; intentional scaffolding into campus operations may help students be more successful
- Use incoming student data to plan for classes and possible adjustments over time
- Set students up for success by personalizing messaging; this can be done in recruiting new students, but also for students who are recruited to programs or activities on campus

## In Retention

- Start classes with announcements and time to ask questions before moving forward
- Deliver equitable access to information to all students about campus technology, resources, academic skills/systems, and connections through a freshman seminar class/transfer class
- Make time to ask “why” when a student is struggling academically; struggles occur for students at different times in academic journey

# Collaborative

## In Recruitment

- Communication between departments pertaining to early arrivals to help students navigate overlapping commitments
- When a new student tells you about their possible major, joining an organization, etc., validate their choices to build confidence and connections in other areas at UNK
- Programs at UNK can reach out to Admissions to be sure their counselors have the most up to date information to promote to their counselors who are interacting with students

## In Retention

- Review and incorporate ideas created by the First Gen Committee at UNK to be more effective in serving all students
- Identify courses that have higher D, F, W rates and consider what the data shows about the impacted students. What adjustments should be made?
- Send academic alerts for students so early interventions can be carried out; advisors receive alerts and have access to mid-term grades so intentional conversations can occur

# Reflective Practice

## In Recruitment

- Exploring factors that may keep particular students from enrolling at UNK to see how UNK can adjust to boost enrollment
- Reviewing data from evaluations to make sure faculty who teach first-year students are well suited for that role
- Making time as a department to review trends and perspectives of current seniors to connect with prospective students in meaningful ways

## In Retention

- Making time in departmental meetings to discuss student concerns, plans for outreach, and how to engage EV in your department
- Reviewing data from evaluations to make sure faculty who teach first-year students are well suited for that role in terms of student success
- Assessing student barriers to see if tailored approaches can be applied (students who are parents, working students, etc.), or if intentional change needs to be made in policies and practices

# How might your institute improve one of the norms in your work with recruitment or retention?

## The 6 **Ecological Validation** norms:

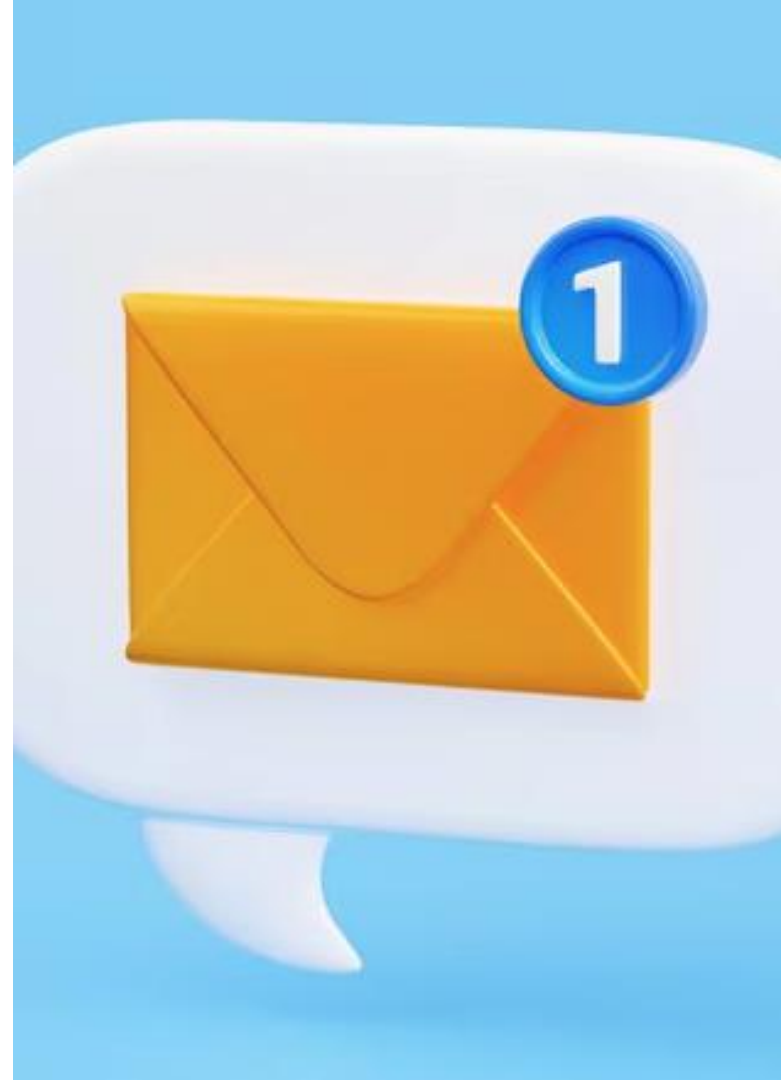
- Holistic
- Proactive
- Strengths-Oriented
- Developmental
- Collaborative
- Reflective practices



# AUDIT our EMAILS

**Consider the norms as we communicate with our students:**

- Review existing email practices, priorities and policies
- Eliminate distracting or unnecessary emails
- Pay attention to frequency, content, **TONE** and order of emails. Are they affirming?
- Is the communication strengths-oriented, proactive, holistic and developmentally appropriate?



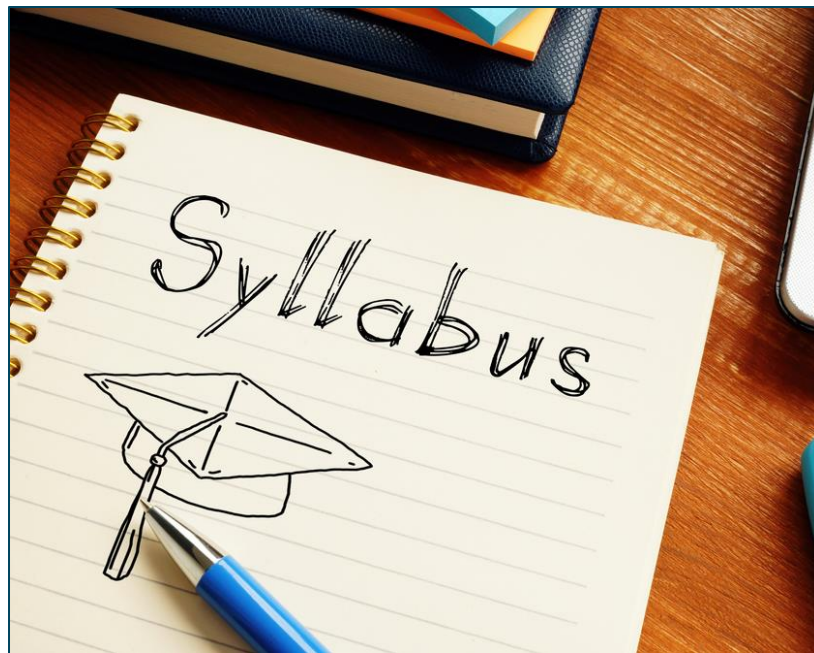
# Key insights from students

- They appreciate messages with clear information and reminders (due dates, fees, checklists, etc.); crisp graphics and emojis resonate
- They like sharing their perspectives
- Volume varies greatly by academic college and group affiliations
- Multiple units were sending messages about the same content
- Primarily announcements of opportunities and resources; few required immediate action by student
- Default auto-messaging added to high volume (receipts for meal plans, mail deliveries, Canvas announcements, etc.)

# AUDIT our SYLLABUS

**Consider how course structure can be focused on the norms:**

- Are they designed to be strengths-oriented, proactive, holistic and developmental, rather than highlighting consequences, or challenges?
- How easy is it for our students to find the key information for a specific class?
- Are we asking students for feedback on the syllabus as we plan for future courses?



# AUDIT our POLICIES

**Consider the norms for writing policy for our programs:**

- Are there policies that students often misunderstand and/or violate?
- Can the students easily find the policies?
- Are there conflicting policies?
- Ask for student feedback on policies.



Policies



# It is not the **WHAT** that matters, but the **HOW** that makes a difference

- Use students' names and get to know them individually
- Explain (and model) how to get support or be successful
- Take seriously seemingly small issues (and take time to understand issue before pointing to resources)
- Observe when students' behaviors change
- Know resources and who works in offices across campus for support
- Recognize when a students' needs exceed your capabilities



# Starting the conversation

***INSTEAD OF:***  
How are your  
classes  
going?



- How are you doing?
- How is your family?
- What is going on in your life right now?
- Do you feel safe?
- How is your nutrition?
- Then dig into classes/academics

# Taking ACTION

How has this conversation helped you consider additional ways to serve your students holistically?



# QUESTIONS?

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