

INCREASING STUDENT SUCCESS: UNDERSTANDING THE IMPACT OF A COMPREHENSIVE COLLEGE TRANSITION PROGRAM

Stakeholder Report for the Thompson Scholars Learning
Communities



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KEY MESSAGES

The Thompson Scholars Learning Communities (TSLC) program is building important psychosocial skills for students.

- Students in TSLC report higher levels of *mattering to campus* and *sense of belonging to campus* than do students who receive a scholarship without the integrated supports of TSLC.
 - *Mattering to campus* is a measure of the extent to which students feel that people at their campus care about them as individuals and their success.
 - *Sense of belonging to campus* is a measure of the extent to which students feel that are part of the broader campus community.
- Higher reported levels of psychosocial outcomes mean students are having richer, more positive experiences on campus. Further, improved psychosocial outcomes are descriptively related to improved academic outcomes, including GPA and persistence.
 - A team of researchers from MIT, led by Joshua Angrist, David Autor, Sally Hudson, and Amanda Pallais, has been studying the impact of receiving a scholarship, with or without integrated supports, and has found that the scholarship leads to increases in four-year college enrollment and six-year degree completion. Our results show there is an added benefit of the integrated supports beyond the benefit from the scholarship.
 - We find significant associations between students' psychosocial outcomes, academic achievement, and persistence.

The Thompson Scholars Learning Communities program is enhancing equity in students' psychosocial outcomes on campus.

- Students of color, first-generation students, students with below-median ACT scores, and students from the lowest-income families who participate in TSLC experience the largest increases in *mattering to campus* over students who receive a scholarship without the integrated support of TSLC.
- While participating in TSLC has positive benefits for all students, it is particularly beneficial for historically underrepresented students, which means the program is leading to greater educational equity.

Important lessons can be learned from the Thompson Scholars Learning Communities program to continue improving students' experiences and outcomes in college.

- Participating in TSLC benefits all students, and particularly students from underrepresented groups. Universities interested in improving student experiences on campus and increasing retention and graduation rates could look to TSLC as an example of a successful comprehensive college transition program that could be adapted to their context.

OVERVIEW OF BRIEF

PURPOSE OF THIS BRIEF

In 2015, the University of Southern California (USC) began a longitudinal, mixed-methods evaluation of the Thompson Scholars Learning Communities (TSLC), a comprehensive college transition program that provides students with multiple, integrated types of support. The evaluation as a whole examined whether, how, and why TSLC, as implemented at the three University of Nebraska campuses, affects students' experiences and outcomes. The evaluation was led by three subteams: a *summative* team, which addressed the question of whether TSLC affects student outcomes using quantitative approaches; a *formative* team, which addressed the question of how TSLC relates to student experiences and outcomes using quantitative approaches; and a *qualitative* team, which addressed the questions of how and why TSLC shapes students' experiences. For more information on the broader project, please see <http://pullias.usc.edu/tslc/>. This brief summarizes the main findings of the *summative* team and offers guidance for program staff and university administrators interested in building on the initial successes of TSLC. Our goal was to answer two main questions:

- 1) Does this program work?
- 2) Are there certain students for whom TSLC is particularly important?

Our team conducted a series of quantitative analyses to answer these questions. In all of our analyses, we compare students in TSLC, who received a scholarship and two years of comprehensive academic, personal, and social support, to students who received a College Opportunity Scholarship (COS) from the Susan Thompson Buffett Foundation, but did not receive the comprehensive support provided by TSLC.

OUTCOMES EXAMINED

- 1) *Sense of mattering to campus* is the extent to which students feel important to others and believe others care about their well-being.
- 2) *Sense of belonging to campus* is the extent to which students feel like they are part of the broader campus community.
- 3) *Academic self-efficacy* is the extent to which students feel like they can succeed academically.
- 4) *Social self-efficacy* is the extent to which students feel like they can successfully navigate social interactions.
- 5) *Career decision-making self-efficacy* is the extent to which students feel confident making decisions about their majors and careers.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

- 1) TSLC significantly increased students' feelings of *mattering to campus* and *sense of belonging to campus*.
- 2) There was no detectable difference in students' *academic* or *social self-efficacy*.
- 3) TSLC was particularly impactful in shaping these outcomes for traditionally underrepresented students, namely, students of color, first-generation students, students with below-median ACT scores, and students from the lowest-income families.

HOW CAN WE KNOW IF TSLC IS EFFECTIVE?

DEFINING THE PROGRAM

The question “does it work?” is the key to program evaluation, but it can be deceptively simple. First, we need to define what “it” is. TSLC is a comprehensive college transition program that provides students with an array of integrated supports during their first two years on campus. TSLC students receive a generous five-year college scholarship, participate in an orientation, take shared academic courses, work with a peer mentor and program staff, live in or have access to dedicated program space, participate in grade check meetings, attend a variety of events, and engage with additional aspects of the TSLC program. In this brief, we do not attempt to disentangle the effects of individual program elements. In other words, we only look at whether TSLC as a whole “works”, rather than whether TSLC “works” because of the shared academic courses, proactive advising, or other specific program elements. The parallel and complementary work of the *formative* and *qualitative* teams, which focused on the “how” and “why” of TSLC, speak to these nuances. As we compare students in TSLC to students receiving the same five-year scholarship but without the two years of comprehensive support, our results show the impact of integrated academic, personal, and social support on student outcomes.

DEFINING STUDENT OUTCOMES

Second, we need to define what we mean by “work”. There are a variety of outcomes we might think could be affected by participating in TSLC. For instance, students in TSLC may be more likely to stay enrolled in college semester-to-semester or they may be more likely to pursue certain majors or careers. We focused on four key psychosocial outcomes: *sense of belonging to campus*, *mattering to campus*, *academic self-efficacy*, and *social self-efficacy*. Psychosocial outcomes like these are not only predictive of whether or not students finish college, but also provide important information about students’ experiences in college, which matters from the perspective of human development and quality of life.

We focus primarily on student outcomes during their first two years on campus, when they receive structured, comprehensive support from the program. However, we do see that these effects persist into students’ third year; our results from additional analyses can be found through our website, listed above.

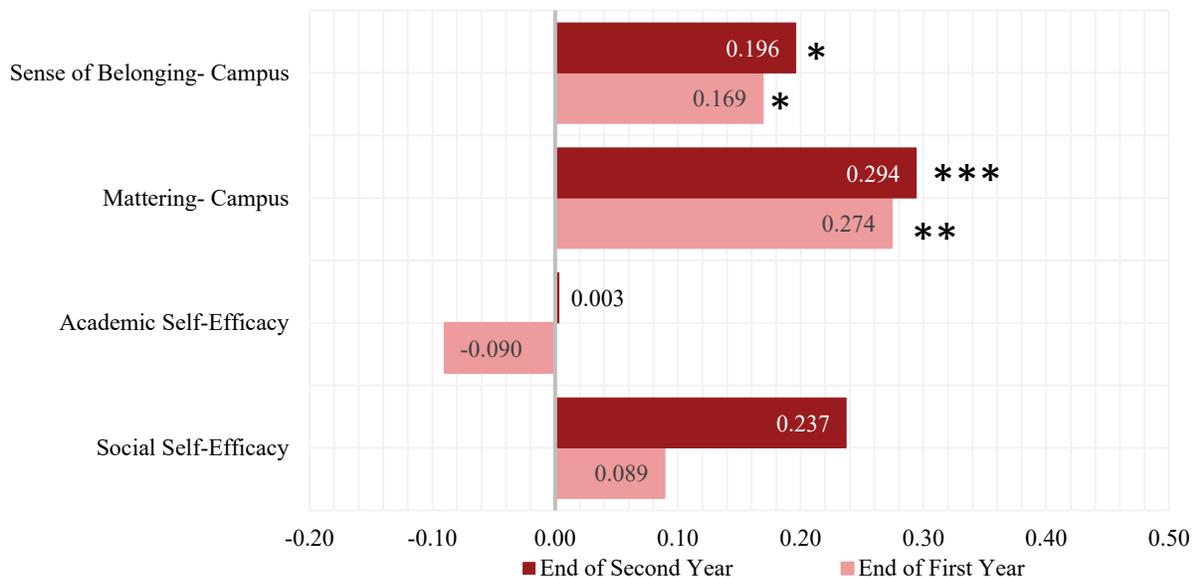
DEFINING THE COMPARISON GROUP

Finally, we need to think about the implicit question raised by asking “does it work?”. What we’re really wondering is “are students in TSLC better off than they would have been if they had not been in TSLC?” This is a difficult question to answer, because we observe some students in TSLC and different students outside of TSLC. How can we be sure that the students who are not in TSLC represent what would have happened to those in TSLC if they hadn’t been accepted into the program? In this work, we leverage an experiment that, from a pool of students who were all eligible for the program, assigned students to participate in TSLC or not by chance. Thanks to this powerful analytical tool, we are able to compare student outcomes between TSLC students, who received a five-year scholarship and two years of comprehensive support, and COS students, who received the five-year scholarship without comprehensive support, and know that differences in outcomes between the two groups are because of access to TSLC.

So...DOES IT WORK?

It's important to understand how we know what we know, but what's more interesting is the answer. So, does TSLC work for increasing psychosocial outcomes? We're pretty confident it does for some outcomes. Figure 1 shows the estimated effect of TSLC on psychosocial outcomes for students' first and second years on campus, when received structured support from TSLC.

Figure 1: Difference in Psychosocial Outcomes between TSLC and Scholarship-Only Students after First and Second Year on Campus



Length of bars represent the difference between students in TSLC and students who receive a scholarship without integrated support, after accounting for student background characteristics, campus, and cohort. Stars indicate whether the differences are statistically significant ($p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$). Statistical significance is a way of the probability that an effect is real, and not the result of chance. The differences we detect in terms of sense of belonging to campus and mattering to campus are statistically significant and represent meaningful changes for students' experiences.*

As shown in Figure 1, students who participate in TSLC have stronger feelings of *mattering to campus* and *sense of belonging to campus*, psychosocial outcomes that are linked to student success in college. The outcomes are measured in standard deviation units, which means that the effects we're seeing aren't just statistically significant, they represent meaningful changes in students' campus experiences and psychosocial outcomes. **What we're finding is that TSLC is making higher education spaces feel more inclusive and welcoming for students.** Students in TSLC come from a variety of backgrounds: the average expected family contribution is less than \$3,000; over two-thirds are the first in their families to earn a bachelor's degree, and 42% are students of color. TSLC students enter college with ACT scores ranging from 11 to 35. TSLC is successfully supporting all students; we refer readers to the *qualitative* team's findings about the importance of creating an ecology of validation within the program for producing these outcomes.

We find no differences in reported *academic* and *social self-efficacy* between TSLC students and students who only receive a scholarship. We do find that, in their third year, TSLC students

report significantly higher levels of **career decision-making self-efficacy** than students who receive a scholarship without integrated support. This suggests that TSLC is helping students feel confident in their ability to make appropriate decisions for their professional futures.

CONNECTION TO ACADEMIC OUTCOMES

Our results indicate that there is an additional benefit of TSLC above the academic benefits of the scholarship alone. A separate research project led by researchers Joshua Angrist, David Autor, Sally Hudson, and Amanda Pallais focuses on the impact of receiving a Buffett scholarship (whether or not the student participates in TSLC) on students' college enrollment, persistence, and graduation. In their analyses, the authors show that this financial support increases college enrollment, persistence, and bachelor's degree completion rates.

We look at the relationship between students' psychosocial outcomes, academic achievement, and persistence directly in a descriptive, not causal, analysis. These associations are often theorized, but less often empirically documented. We find that increases in each of the four psychosocial outcomes are related to increases in students' *cumulative GPA* and *likelihood of remaining enrolled* in the University of Nebraska system throughout students' first three years on campus. In particular, students' **academic self-efficacy** and **sense of belonging to campus** are most strongly related to students' academic outcomes. This suggests that TSLC may want to consider how it can further support the development of students' academic self-efficacy.

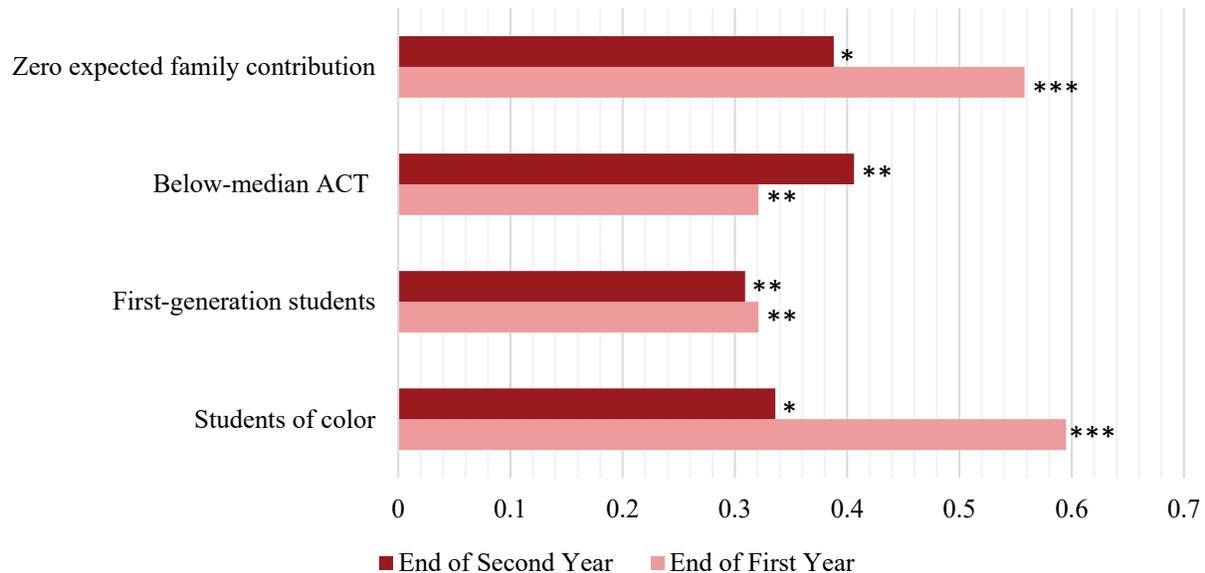
DOES IT WORK MORE FOR UNDERREPRESENTED STUDENTS?

In addition to being excited that the program helps students feel like they belong on campus and matter to those around them, we wondered whether participating in TSLC was particularly impactful for underrepresented students, who historically have been marginalized at postsecondary institutions. So, we looked at whether the effect of TSLC varied based on student race/ethnicity, first-generation status, family income, and prior academic achievement.

We found that participating in TSLC was most impactful for students of color, first-generation students, students with below-median ACT scores, and students from the lowest-income families. In other words, **participating in TSLC improves outcomes for all students, but is particularly beneficial for students who traditionally have been marginalized in higher education.**

Figure 2 illustrates the effects on mattering to campus we found for students in their first and second years, broken down into various student groups.

Figure 2: Differences in Reported Mattering to Campus between TSLC and Scholarship-Only Students after Students' First and Second Year on Campus, for Selected Student Groups



Length of bars represent the difference between students in TSLC and students who received a scholarship without integrated support, after accounting for student background characteristics, campus, and cohort. Stars indicate whether the differences are statistically significant (* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$). Statistical significance is a way of the probability that an effect is real, and not the result of chance. The differences we find are statistically significant and represent meaningful changes for students' experiences and outcomes.

GREATER ACADEMIC IMPACTS FOR UNDERREPRESENTED STUDENTS

Again, our findings comport with those emerging from the team at MIT, who also find large increases in both enrollment and degree attainment for students of color, first-generation students, students who are Pell-eligible or have a below-median family income, and students with below-median ACT scores or high school GPAs as a result of being offered a scholarship (regardless of whether or not that scholarship comes with comprehensive support). Taken together, these findings indicate that students from historically underrepresented groups in particular benefit from additional support as they transition into and move through college. We will continue to learn more as students progress through college and towards graduation.

WHAT SHOULD WE DO WITH THESE FINDINGS?

The provision of comprehensive support is a powerful tool for improving students' experiences on campus and increasing student success.

- Our results indicate that the work being done by TSLC staff, peer mentors, faculty, and others involved in the program is effective at developing critical psychosocial outcomes, particularly in the first year and particularly for students historically underrepresented in higher education. For more specific recommendations related to promising practices

emerging from TSLC, we refer readers to the results emerging from the *formative* and *qualitative* research teams.

TSLC could do more to develop students' academic and social self-efficacy.

- While we find positive impacts of TSLC on students' sense of belonging to campus and mattering to campus, we find less evidence that TSLC is improving students' self-efficacy. We find no differences in academic or social self-efficacy between students in TSLC and students who receive a scholarship without integrated support. TSLC programs should reflect on the work they are doing to support the development of academic and social self-efficacy and ways to strengthen those efforts. We do find that TSLC students express higher levels of career decision-making self-efficacy in their third year on campus than students who receive a scholarship without integrated support. This suggests the program can influence students' self-efficacy through intentional programming and support.

TSLC is helping to close equity gaps.

- The large effects we find for students of color, first-generation students, and low-income students indicate that universities may want to consider creating or expanding similar transition programs to improve student outcomes across the board and enhance equity in students' on-campus experiences. Ours is one of the first projects to examine the equity implications of a comprehensive college transition program; similar programs across the country should also be evaluated using this lens.
- TSLC worked when serving students with a range of backgrounds and prior experiences. Given scarce resources, institutions may be interested in creating similar programs that are more narrowly targeted towards students with marginalized identities or certain academic profiles. Our results do not necessarily indicate that such programs would have similar effects as TSLC, and any such initiatives should be rigorously evaluated to further refine institutional practices.

RECOMMENDED READINGS/RESOURCES

Be sure to check out website: <http://pullias.usc.edu/tslc/> for updates about all the work being done at USC on the TSLC program. Additionally, you may want to read the following papers to expand on some of the points raised in this brief:

- Melguizo, T., Martorell, F., Swanson, E., Chi, W.E., Park, W., & Kezar, A. (2019). The Effects of a Comprehensive College Transition Program on Psychosocial Factors Associated with Success in College. (EdWorkingPaper: 19-158). Retrieved from Annenberg Institute at Brown University: <http://www.edworkingpapers.com/ai19-158>
- Angrist, J., Autor, D., Hudson, S., & Pallais, A. (2016). Evaluating post-secondary aid: Enrollment, persistence, and projected completion outcomes. (NBER Working Paper: 23015). Retrieved from National Bureau of Economic Research: <https://www.nber.org/papers/w23015.pdf>
- Hallett, R., Reason, R., Toccoli, J., Kitchen, J., & Perez, R. (2020). The process of academic validation within a comprehensive college transition program. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 64(3), 253-275. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764219869419>.