



New Research Finds That Forecasting Common Challenges for Students in the Transition to College Can Reduce Inequality at Institutional Scale

Three studies show that helping incoming students anticipate challenges in college and recognize these as normal and temporary can help students get involved on campus, build relationships, and ultimately succeed at a higher rate, especially for students of color and first-generation college students

STANFORD, CA (Monday, May 30, 2016) -- The opportunity for all students to succeed in college and thus make a better life for themselves and their families is central to the American dream. Yet despite decades of reforms, large gaps remain in the rates at which racial, ethnic and socioeconomic groups in the United States succeed in college.

New research suggests that a new approach can make a difference. The findings were published today in the [Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences](#). They provide a basis for a new organization, the [College Transition Collaborative](#) (CTC), which aims to identify points of psychological friction in the transition to college and ways to remedy these.

All students face challenges in coming to college, whether struggling in a class or difficulty making friends. However, students of color and first-generation students enter college knowing that their group might face negative stereotypes and has historically been less successful in college than others. When faced with early challenges, this knowledge can seed toxic worries like, "Maybe people like me don't belong or can't succeed in college."

Three institutional-scale randomized controlled trials presented incoming college students with stories from older students describing social and academic challenges they faced in coming to college. The stories represented these challenges as normal and improving with time. Incoming students then reflected on why early challenges are normal in the transition to college, and what they expected to experience.

These exercises, presented online in the summer before the first year of college, improved incoming students' persistence and success over the first year.

The benefits were greatest for students of color who face negative stereotypes in college and those who would be the first in their family to earn a college degree. In a sample of more than 9,500 students, the exercises closed institutional achievement gaps in full-time enrollment and grades between students from backgrounds that are disadvantaged in college and other students at the participating schools by 31-40%.

“When students face difficulties in college, they have to make sense of them. Why am I feeling lonely? Why was I criticized? Why am I struggling?,” said Greg Walton, associate professor of psychology at Stanford University and a principal investigator with the College Transition Collaborative. “It helps to know in advance that it’s normal to struggle at first in college. It doesn’t mean you’re dumb or that people like you don’t belong in college. When you know that struggles are normal, it’s easier to take a chance on making friends even when you feel different or isolated, join a student group, or go to your professor’s office hours. And doing those kinds of things helps students build relationships that can support them through college.”

As compared to a randomized control condition, students from disadvantaged backgrounds who completed the exercise were more socially and academically integrated in college, more likely to complete the first year enrolled full-time, less likely to fall in the bottom of the class, and earned higher grade point averages.

“One reason these findings are so exciting is that they validate and replicate findings from earlier research conducted with a much smaller set of students,” said David Yeager, assistant professor of developmental psychology at the University of Texas at Austin and also a principal investigator with the College Transition Collaborative. “With more than 9,500 students, these studies provide an unparalleled test of the replicability and policy-relevance of such exercises to help students anticipate common challenges in the transition to college.”

Implications for Future Research

The authors emphasized that these exercises do not work in isolation but help students take advantage of opportunities available to them. They aren’t “magic bullets.” For the exercises to be effective, students need access to resources and other support.

With support from school partners and the Raikes Foundation, the CTC is conducting ongoing work with colleges and universities to further evaluate this approach and identify in what kinds of schools and with what kinds of students it will be most effective in improving student outcomes.

About The College Transition Collaborative

The [College Transition Collaborative](#) helps colleges reduce the academic underperformance, dropout, and diminished well-being that can be caused by psychological friction in college. CTC researchers develop and rigorously test scalable interventions; engineer novel solutions that enable widespread use; and raise awareness about how institutions can improve student outcomes by adding a social-psychological lens to student success initiatives. The College Transition Collaborative partners with the [Mindset Scholars Network](#) and the [Project for Education Research That Scales \(PERTS\)](#) at Stanford University.

Contact: Natasha Krol, Managing Director, College Transition Collaborative, npk@stanford.edu, (415) 741-5663.