Designing College for Everyone
Leveraging Psychology to Create Equitable Learning Environments
from Orientation to Graduation

Despite enormous investments by institutions of higher education to provide academic and financial supports for their students, 4 out of 10 new 4-year college students do not graduate within 6 years. Completion rates are even lower for students of color, first-generation college-goers, and students from low income backgrounds. Over a decade of research shows that students' psychological experience of college can critically affect their academic outcomes. By creating learning environments that help students feel competent, valued, and connected to others, colleges and universities can help more students persist through the inevitable challenges of higher education and graduate with their degree.

How can we help more students succeed?
The ways people make meaning of themselves and their experiences can shape their beliefs and behaviors (see call out box). For example, when new students encounter challenges in the transition to college, they are more likely to remain socially and academically engaged if they see these challenges as common and surmountable, rather than implying a lack of ability or potential.

Scientists have demonstrated that well-designed learning environments can have lasting effects on how students make meaning of events and respond to difficulties (see call out box). When students feel like their school believes in them and provides a clear path to success, they are more likely to participate in class, attend office hours, join student groups, seek mentors, and make use of resources provided by their institution that may otherwise be underutilized.

Schools send students countless messages every day, both explicitly in communications and implicitly in the design of policies, programs, and practices. Colleges have a powerful opportunity to support student achievement by ensuring that the messages, policies, programs, and practices students encounter throughout their college journey are informed by an understanding of how students make meaning of their experiences – i.e., students' "psychological experience" of college.

> **"This approach requires thinking about students differently… it assumes that all students can succeed."**
> CTC Partner Administrator at a Large Public University

Learning environments attuned to students' experiences, beliefs, and concerns can help students make sense of challenges and transitions in ways that bolster academic performance and foster well-being. This is especially critical for students who have been targeted by negative stereotypes throughout their life, and may reasonably experience challenges–such as a low grade on an exam, difficulty registering for courses, difficulty making friends, or being placed on academic probation–as yet another sign that they do not belong or can't succeed.

The student need is urgent. Yet, despite decades of research indicating the importance of students' psychological experience in college, few resources exist to help schools apply findings from existing research or integrate psychologically attuned approaches into broader completion efforts. Simultaneously, many researchers cannot reach enough practitioners to ensure their work is actionable for schools.

What is the role of the College Transition Collaborative (CTC)?
CTC helps schools approach student success through a psychological lens from orientation to graduation. We work to identify and understand key points in a student's college journey that can be critical to sustaining or undermining students' sense that they can be successful in college, and where colleges can intervene through psychologically attuned approaches and help their students reach their full potential.

CTC:

- Works with researchers and practitioners to **identify and map pivotal moments of transition or difficulty throughout college** that may cause students to question their belonging or potential, and where schools can intervene through existing channels (e.g., messages, policies).
- **Builds awareness and understanding** for how students' psychological experiences can impact well-being and achievement throughout their college journey **by illustrating these critical points from orientation to graduation.**
- **Connects practitioners and researchers with each other to develop and test evidence-based, psychologically attuned tools and resources** designed to address these pivotal moments, including diagnostic tools, direct-to-student programs, and administrator toolkits.
- **Partners with key intermediaries to scale these approaches** and ensure adoption with fidelity across contexts.

Programs and practices developed by CTC researchers have been implemented for thousands of students at nearly 60 colleges and universities across the U.S. and have helped support student well-being, engagement, achievement, and completion.

Examples of opportunities for schools to support students' psychological experience of college:
Quotes in italics represent real quotes from student responses.

Transition into College *"I have become more and more anxious about my arrival on campus. I worry that it may be difficult to find my niche and to find people who I really connect with."*	• Do **welcome messages** communicate to students that diverse kinds of students belong in college, or do they signal that only some kinds of people belong and others don't? ([Learn More: Social-Belonging](#)) • Do messages around **placement tests**, especially poor performance on placement tests, lead students to question whether they belong and can succeed in college? • Do restrictions placed on **transfer students** lead students to anticipate that they won't belong or do well in college, or that their prior education is de-valued?
Points of Difficulty *"I felt incredibly alone. No one seems to struggle, at least not to the degree I am."*	• How do large class sizes or explicit attempts to "weed out" students in **gateway courses** for certain majors impact students' feelings of belonging or academic potential? • Do communications about **academic setbacks** communicate that faculty and the college care about their success and believe they can improve? ([Learn More: Academic Standing](#)) • Do communications about **remedial coursework** lead students to feel "dumb" and communicate a fixed mindset about intelligence?
Throughout College *"You typically feel uncomfortable and out of place when you are suddenly surrounded by people who don't look like you and who don't come from similar backgrounds."*	• How can schools help foster positive **intergroup relationships**? How can schools foster the development of more diverse social networks? How do schools message valuing of diversity to students, and how does this impact intergroup relations?

**Why do students' psychological experiences matter for college completion?**

From a young age, students develop frameworks for understanding themselves and others based on observations of society, adults, peers, and the policies and practices they encounter. These frameworks provide a lens through which students make meaning of the world, informing their motivation and behaviors.

Many students come to college with concerns about their ability to succeed; however this burden is not felt equally. When students know that people in their family haven't succeeded in college before, that their background is underrepresented on campus, or that people like them are stereotyped as less intellectually capable than others, they tend to worry more than their peers if they belong or if they will succeed.

These worries provide students a lens for making sense of challenges in college and contribute to the persistent inequality in higher education outcomes by disproportionately affecting students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, and students who are the first in their family to attend college.

Almost every student struggles sometimes, whether in receiving a low grade on an exam or experiencing difficulties making friends. Yet for students aware of pervasive stereotypes about their ability and already wondering, "Can I belong?" or "Can I do this?", discouraging or ambiguous signals (e.g., "Did my professor give me critical feedback because he thinks people like me can't succeed or because he wants to improve my writing?") make it easy and reasonable to infer "I don't belong" or "I can't do this" during moments of difficulty. These inferences can then discourage students from asking professors for help, from attending office hours, from joining study groups, and from making friends—depriving students of key social and academic supports and setting in motion a downward cycle that can ultimately lead to underperformance and disengagement (See Figure 1 below).

Figure 1. Students' worries can compound over time into a negative recursive cycle.
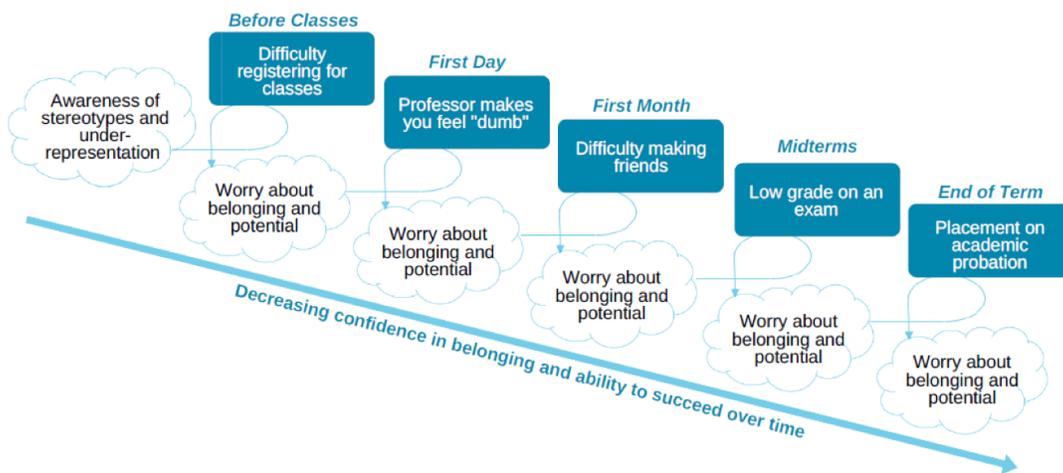
Source: Murphy, Yeager, Walton, Logel. (2017). Mapping the Role of Psychological Friction on College Students' Worries About Belonging and Potential Throughout their Academic Trajectory.

How can schools motivate and support students in pivotal moments throughout college?
Schools send students messages every day, both explicitly in communications and implicitly in the design of policies, programs, and practices. These messages provide powerful opportunities to help students make meaning of challenges in positive, adaptive ways, interrupting the negative cycle of worry and supporting students to re-engage with the many resources available to ensure they succeed (See Figure 2 below). By increasing the likelihood that students make use of the opportunities and supports provided by their school, psychologically attuned approaches are highly complementary with broader efforts including improvements in pedagogy, financial aid, and academic resources.

Figure 2: Psychologically attuned learning environments can interrupt and reverse negative recursive cycles of student experience.
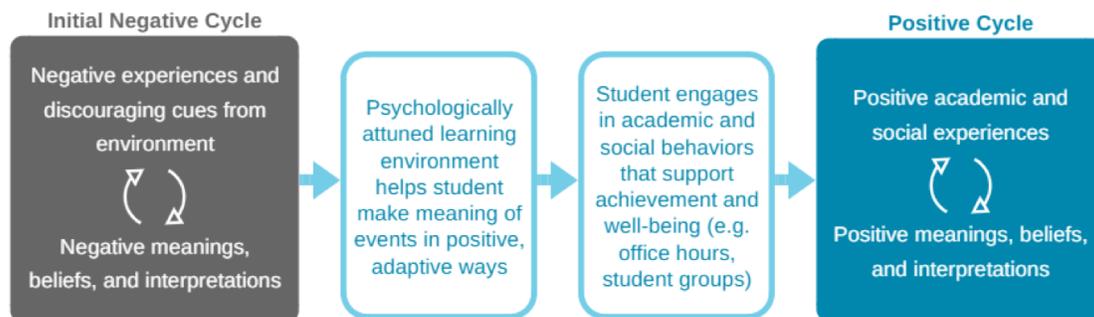
Source: Walton & Wilson (2017). Wise Interventions; Yeager et al (2016). Teaching a lay theory before college narrows achievement gaps at scale.

To learn more about how students' psychological experiences impact academic outcomes, please see the Mindset Scholars Network's in-depth brief entitled "Mindset Science Informing Practice".

Join us in learning more.
The mission of the College Transition Collaborative (CTC) is to create higher education learning environments that foster equitable student outcomes by bridging psychological research and practice. Our work helps schools better understand how their students experience moments of transition or difficulty and how psychologically attuned practices–messages, policies, behaviors, and programs–can convey to all students they are valued, respected, and can excel.

Please visit http://collegetransitioncollaborative.org and sign up for our newsletter to access current resources, receive the latest updates on our work, and stay in touch to contribute your perspectives. We look forward to learning together!