

A Comprehensive College Transition Program and Nonprogram Peer and Faculty Interactions:
An Application of Mediation Analysis

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Abstract

To increase degree attainment, postsecondary institutions and external organizations provide different academic, social, career, and financial supports to students. This study evaluates how meaningful psychosocial outcomes (sense of belonging, mattering, academic and social self-efficacy, and resiliency) from one such program are mediated by interactions with (nonprogram) peers and faculty in the broader campus environment. The program studied, the Thompson Scholars Learning Community (TSLC), helps low-income students succeed in college beyond the confines of the program. Participants studied are in one recent cohort of first-time college students attending a University of Nebraska campus. Participants studied ($N = 450$) were randomly assigned to the TSLC program or to one of two comparison conditions. Using a multiple-mediator model, structural equation modelling is used to estimate mediational paths among treatment and latent mediator and outcome variables. Results are preliminary, pending the addition of data from a second cohort. The main finding is that TSLC participants interacted more with nonprogram faculty ($p < .01$). Evidence is weaker on the effect of TSLC on interactions with nonprogram peers. Additionally, estimates suggest interactions involving coursework with nonprogram peers to be positively associated with greater sense of mattering and academic and social self-efficacy in one contrast ($p < .001$). Other estimated associations between nonprogram peer and faculty interactions and psychosocial outcomes were mixed. We do not find evidence that nonprogram peer and faculty interactions mediated the relationship between program assignment and the psychosocial outcomes studied.

Keywords: college persistence, peer and faculty interactions, psychosocial outcomes, mediation, program evaluation