The Possibilities and Precautions of Using the Designation "At-Promise" in Higher Education Research

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Abstract

The term *at-promise* gained prominence as a strength-based way to refer to students from minoritized backgrounds that contrasted from deficit-laden terms like *at-risk*. In this scholarly paper, we argue that beyond avoiding an obvious deficit categorization, adoption of the term *at-promise* has potential to influence scholarship in higher education research by centering the need for systemic change. Building on prior literature on *at-promise* student terminology and conceptual frameworks of funds of knowledge, community cultural wealth, and validation theory, we suggest that the *at-promise* phrase offers two important contributions to higher education. First, by emphasizing interconnectivity and shared experiences across systems of power, the *at-promise* designation can be used to build coalitions amongst minoritized groups and advocate for broader systemic change. Second, the term promise reflects a societal commitment to improving educational access and retention that is integral to the social contract of higher education as a public good. Thus, use of *at-promise* can center the need for systemic change, but only when done with intentionality to avoid conflation of minoritized groups.

Keywords: at-promise, at-risk, strength-based, low-income, first-generation, students of color

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In late 2019, California legislators passed a bill to replace references to at-risk youth in the state's educational law with the term *at-promise* (McKenzie, 2019). The shift was intended to break with prior norms in which students from minoritized backgrounds, particularly Black students, were characterized through deficit perspectives as unlikely to persist with their education (Swadener, 1990; Swadener & Lubek, 1995; Whiting, 2006). To date, most educational research and practice that has used *at-promise* has focused on K-12 settings (Rios & Mireles-Rio, 2019). Recently, the term has been applied to understand the experiences of marginalized populations in higher education (e.g., Kezar et al., 2020; Kitchen et al., 2021) as part of a larger call to leverage anti-deficit frameworks for student success (Harper, 2010). However, relatively little in-depth examination of *at-promise* terminology in higher education research has been conducted.

Here, we examine the *at-promise* categorization through the framework of validation (Rendón, 1994; Rendón & Muñoz, 2011). Building upon prior scholarship that advocates for the use of *at-promise* as a counter to deficit labeling (Cheese & Vines, 2017; Rios & Mireles-Rios, 2019), we argue that *at-promise* has the potential to highlight the need for structural changes and commitments to support students' innate potential. First, the use of *at-promise* terminology emphasizes strength-based approaches that are not siloed around specific identities but instead allow for the opportunity to build coalitions around shared resilience and resistance to oppression. Second, the idea of promise can underscore institutional accountability for creating new structures and systems that support all students, consistent with the framing of education as a public good for societal benefit.

This expanded rationale for using *at-promise* as a categorization calls upon institutions, stakeholders (e.g., faculty, staff, and administrators), and policymakers to ensure educational access and success. Rather than continuing to place the onus for educational attainment and success on students, we conceptualize promise as the commitment made to students who have been minoritized within society as a whole and higher education specifically. Through this framing, we articulate a series of considerations for researchers to use *at-promise* as a systemic tool without erasing nuances across distinctive identities.

Literature Review

The following section outlines the development of the *at-promise* categorization alongside key considerations for using individual identities (e.g., low-income, racially minoritized) specifically compared to categorizations that refer to multiple identity

groups. By juxtaposing these two bodies of literature, we position *at-promise* within broader considerations for using expansive identity-centered terminology.

At-Promise Overview

Historically, the term *at-promise* has been used to refer to students who were excluded and underserved in educational systems (Cheese & Vines, 2017; Ford & Harris, 1991; Swadener, 1990). The term was developed as a strength-based counter to the traditional deficit-based designation of *at-risk* in an attempt to explicitly address theories of 'gifted and talented' (Ford & Harris, 1991). Students, particularly racially minoritized students, were determined to be *at-risk* when they did not excel at standardized testing, which predominantly reinforces white, middle-class ways of thinking and learning (Bernal, 1981; Ford & Harris, 1991). In moving beyond deficit-based theories, educators and scholars have argued for categorizing minoritized students as *at-promise* to acknowledge the experiences and opportunities that all students bring to their schooling (Mireles-Rios et al., 2020).

Given the goal of affirming minoritized students' experiences and assets, the term *at-promise* can incorporate a range of identities and groups—low-income, racially minoritized, first-generation college students, students with disabilities, LGBTQ+ students, English language learners, undocumented students, and many other identities and backgrounds. Identifying students as *at-promise* intends to center empowerment and agency while also addressing inequities and injustices (Cheese & Vines, 2017). The goal of using *at-promise* is to emphasize that students already possess the ability to succeed and may benefit from support and resources designed to address barriers that inhibit students' academic success (Rios & Mireles-Rios, 2019). Alternative to *at-promise*, the term at-potential has also been used (McKenzie, 2019) for similar reasoning, though to a lesser extent.

Tensions in Constructing Categories

The *at-promise* categorization intentionally encompasses multiple minoritized identities. As such, considerations for its use align with broader considerations regarding terminology for marginalized groups, when it is appropriate to use more expansive language (i.e., includes multiple subgroups), and cautions against conflating identities. Here, we draw upon several related precedents. Studies of pan-ethnic terminology have demonstrated that broad pan-ethnic groupings (e.g., Latinx, Asian, Black) can mask important differences across sub-groups and lead to incorrect measurements, analysis, and conclusions (Aspinall, 2002; DiPietro & Bursik, 2012). For example, research on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders may focus on successful rates of postsecondary attainment. However, disaggregated data reveal nuances within this population caused by differential historical events, immigration patterns, racialization, and socio-economic patterns (Poon et al., 2016). Thus, data that combines all subpopulations may erase the disparate barriers faced by different Asian American and Pacific Islander

groups, resulting in lower rates of college completion for Southeast Asian Americans compared to East and South Asian American students (Museus & Kiang, 2012). Research on social class often equates first-generation, low-income, and working-class categorizations (Linkon, 2021; Stich & Freie, 2016). Such conflation can obscure the role of power, systems (e.g., capitalism), and culture in understanding social class (Stich & Freie, 2016). The designation of LGBTQ+ combines categories related to sexual orientation (lesbian, gay, bisexual) and gender identity (transgender), which can minimize the nuances of each (Renn, 2010). These examples, while not intended to form an exhaustive list, show that while collective language can be valuable, such terminology should be used with careful consideration of context and goals as to not flatten nuances within differential experiences.

Additionally, one concern regarding *at-promise* terminology is that scholarly categorizations may or may not resonate with participants themselves. For example, Salinas (2020) found that students used the term Latinx in institutional contexts to fit with external expectations. However, college students did not use Latinx to self-identify and reverted to other designations they perceived as more culturally relevant in other contexts (e.g., with friends or family). Bettencourt and colleagues (2022) noted that first-generation college students largely understood first-generation status as an institutional destination rather than a designation that they applied to their experiences independently. Thus, another consideration of *at-promise* may be its lack of resonance with the individuals that might be encompassed in such a designation. In research contexts, the result may be that students do not participate in important research because they do not see the study as applicable to their experiences.

Centering Strength-Based Approaches

The initial uptake of *at-promise* categorizations to focus on the assets that minoritized students bring to education (e.g., Swadener, 1990; Swadener & Lubek, 1995; Whiting, 2006) aligns with many strength-based frameworks in higher education. In particular, funds of knowledge (Kiyama & Rios-Aguilar, 2017; Ramos & Kiyama, 2021) and community cultural wealth (CCW; Yosso, 2005) emphasize the positive attributes that minoritized students develop in their home communities that benefit their education. Funds of knowledge are strategies and wisdom that have been historically accumulated and are drawn upon by households and communities to survive and thrive (Moll et al., 2013). Ramos and Kiyama (2021) noted that funds of knowledge allow communities to challenge power and oppressive structures, span a variety of familial, institutional, and community contexts, and include a dynamic range of cultural practices. In CCW, Yosso (2005) expanded upon traditional notions of capital to examine the cultural knowledge, skills, and networks that racially minoritized individuals possess. Yosso proposed six forms of cultural capital: (a) aspirational, which focuses on resilience amidst obstacles and future goals; (b) familial, or connections to one's family and community; (c) linguistic, focusing on the ability to communicate in more than

one cultural community; (d) resistant, stemming from a recognition of oppression and motivation to create change; (e) navigational, to highlight individual agency and resourcefulness; and, (f) social, which highlights one's social networks. Together, these frameworks challenge deficit perspectives to instead reframe understandings of how *at-promise* students bring multiple assets to their education.

To bridge these individual assets with a call for systemic action, we also draw upon validation theory by Rendón (1994, 2002). Rather than placing the onus for learning solely on students, Rendón specifically highlights the responsibility of institutional agents (e.g., instructors, advisors) for validating students' experiences. In validation theory, students enter higher education with a reserve of assets, strengths, and capabilities such as those outlined by funds of knowledge and CCW. Subsequently, it is the responsibility of institutional agents to proactively support and develop students by drawing upon those reserves for academic and personal success (Rendón, 1994; 2002; Rendón & Muñoz, 2011). More recently, scholars have approached validation from an ecological lens to demonstrate the value of creating institutional structures where minoritized students' assets, strengths, and capabilities are affirmed through a multi-faceted web of support (Kitchen et al., 2021). The use of validation recognizes the strengths that minoritized students possess and calls on institutions to proactively acknowledge these strengths and accordingly develop programs, approaches, and structures to support student success.

Considerations for the At-Promise Categorization

Based on this examination, we agree that in its most direct application, *at-promise* is a logical counterpoint to *at-risk* framings of minoritized students. However, we build upon this approach to argue that full potential of *at-promise* as a student categorization is in its structural focus. Specifically, using *at-promise* allows scholars to focus on systems that create inequities while emphasizing the responsibility of society and institutions in addressing these issues. We review these two uses below.

Building Coalitions

The term *at-promise* provides a foundation to examine shared experiences across minoritized groups and to challenge oppression holistically rather than employing single axis approaches (e.g., racism, classism, sexism). One critique of existing support for minoritized populations is that efforts are often siloed and do not support students across intersecting experiences or needs (Pendakur, 2016). Without complex understandings of oppression and how it is co-created and reinforced, remedies often only address manifestations, rather than causes, of oppression. Scholars have examined this limited attempt at supporting students across multiple facets—by exploring the distinction between first-order and second-order change (Pope et al., 2019), framing diversity as a value instead of a good (Watt, 2015), or emphasizing the need to target affirmative and transformative change

(Bettencourt, 2020; Fraser, 1995). This move from individual identity to systemic foci has also been embraced in student affairs scholarship and praxis as student development theory evolved from its second wave (focusing on specific social identities) to third wave (focused on the structures of inequality; Jones, 2019).

As such, we hope to center and amplify opportunities for interconnectivity across minoritized groups (Ashlee & Combs, 2022; Keating, 2013). Keating (2013) described interconnectivity as understanding commonalities across individuals and groups as points of complex connection that contain multiple intersecting possibilities, opportunities, and challenges. This interconnectivity happens at the thresholds of specific identities—the spaces that operate across and between existing categories—which makes the commonalities in these points relational and nonbinary. Subsequently, Ashlee and Combs (2022) applied interconnectivity to higher education as "a deliberate examination of both similarities and differences across identities and an acknowledgment of how inherited systems of power inform different positionalities" (p. 6). Using interconnectivity in higher education relies on a practice of compassionate caution to examine similarities as sites of coalition building. At the same time, individuals must be mindful of differences and not conflate this shared empathy and understanding with sameness.

One way that the shared experiences implied by *at-promise* terminology can disrupt silos and enable more transformative approaches is through the idea of tailoring, an approach in which practitioners identify individual student needs while simultaneously exploring if these needs reflected broader trends (Kezar et al., 2020). Kezar and colleagues (2020) studied a comprehensive college transition program for *at-promise* students and found that the programs were able to identify needs amongst one group of students, conduct assessment to examine potential trends, and create initiatives that supported multiple groups. For example, practitioners in the study noticed similar trends for students who came into the college with low ACT scores, who worked many hours, and among student parents related to academic probation. These practitioners then used this examination of shared experiences to create a program focused on promoting retention through proactive outreach and amplified support. Such approaches draw upon the strength-based and validating approaches that embrace students' potential for success (Pendakur, 2016) while scaling up successful initiatives to be broadly beneficial.

Centering Institutional Responsibility

The term *at-promise* amplifies the responsibility of higher education institutions to serve students who have been marginalized historically and contemporaneously by postsecondary systems. Higher education is still predicated on the idea that it is up to students to be college-ready and able to navigate their academic careers upon entering postsecondary education (McNair et al., 2016). Instead, scholars have emphasized a need to center institutional responsibility by asking how institutions can be student-ready—able to support and meet the needs of the diverse demographics that arrive on campus (McNair et al., 2016). In this context, institutions have the

responsibility to change to support all students instead of expecting marginalized and underserved student groups to assimilate to white, middle class, and masculine ways of being and learning. The *at-promise* designation furthers this ideology by emphasizing the need to proactively examine the complex and intersecting barriers that can hinder students' journeys and agency. Moreover, *at-promise* terminology, by using a more expansive scope, pushes researchers, advocates, and educators to be multiple identity-conscious in their approaches to allow for more comprehensive and innovative solutions to serving students.

At-promise terminology also pushes higher education institutions to emphasize the societal commitment to provide educational access (Dorn, 2017; Labaree, 1997). Often, the evolution of higher education in the United States has been painted one of a slow progression toward expanded access. Beginning with Harvard in 1636, the first colleges were founded to prepare white, affluent men for clerical roles and to deculturate Indigenous peoples (Thelin, 2019; Wright, 1988). From its inception, notions of education as a public good were limited and far from universal (Nelson et al., 2022). However, the proliferation of higher education institutions was spurred by federal and state investment in education (e.g., the Morrill Land Grant Act of 1862) and legislation that directly expanded access to minoritized populations such as the Civil Rights Act of 1965, Title IX of the Education Amendments Act of 1972, and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (Thelin, 2019). Yet enduring gaps within higher education remain regarding educational access and attainment. For example, Pell Grants were once a key funding vehicle for low-income students; however, failure by the federal government to fund the Pell Grant program at rates comparable to tuition increases and inflation has reduced the power of the grants and fueled an increased reliance on loans (Goldrick-Rab, 2016). As such, in embracing the term *at-promise*, we hope scholars and advocates can push for a societal (re)commitment to educational access for all students, including those whose land (Indigenous peoples) and labor (Black peoples) undergirded the creation of many higher education institutions (Nash, 2019; Wilder, 2014). Not only does a commitment to equitable access benefit students through the attainment of higher education in a myriad of ways (Mayhew et al., 2016), but it fulfills the civic purpose of higher education in preparing students to serve as engaged citizens in a democratic society (Dorn, 2017; Labaree, 1997; Lagemann & Lewis, 2012). Such functions are particularly crucial in the increasingly polarized political climate of modern U.S. society (Daniels, 2021).

Our framing of promise as a commitment has started to take hold in other parts of higher education. Most notably, the term "promise program" refers to financial aid programs that provide students with educational scholarships. Originally, these promise programs were largely based on residency, and were developed in states or communities with lower educational attainment and/or economic decline. Early programs had geographic residency requirements for students' eligibility, hoping students would secure jobs post-graduation in the area and spur economic growth (Billings, 2018; Miller-Adams, 2021). While the framing of these programs explicitly positions education as

a public good through the lens of economic gain that benefits both individuals and communities, the use of promise largely aligns with the approach we advocate for here. The promise denotes a commitment to providing support needed for historically marginalized and underserved student groups to be retained until graduation. The promise also involves shifting institutional priorities, practices, and policies in ways that allow students to experience belonging, mattering, and validation while attending colleges and universities. Resultantly, such framing should be used to create and further institutional commitments rather than simply creating or advocating for a new label.

Conclusion

Terminology in educational research is constantly evolving. Our exploration and recommendations of the *at-promise* categorization reflect other calls to focus on systemic change and address underlying issues of oppression (Stewart, 2017). Such research does not supplant the need to explore specific minoritized groups' experiences, but to do so alongside collective research that looks more systemically. In this paper, we explored the term *at-promise* to examine its potential and pitfalls within higher education research. Rather than looking to flatten experiences of oppression, we emphasized how systems of oppression are interlocking and reinforcing in ways that create barriers for minoritized students. We argued that when used intentionally, *at-promise* can emphasize coalitions across minoritized groups to target systemic oppression and center the commitments of institutions and society in fostering educational access. However, without intentionality, *at-promise* risks becoming another term that serves as a catchall for minoritized groups, repackaging inequity under the guise of new terminology.

We envision *at-promise* not only as a designation but as a call to action. Our approach is more than just recognizing individual attributes. Instead, it is a recognition that higher education was not designed to serve *at-promise* students (Nelson et al., 2022) who stand to benefit the most from access to higher education (Hout, 2012). To support *at-promise* students now, we must not only recognize the strengths they possess, but commit to fostering their success. This focus may run counter to neoliberal influences that focus on market value and reify institutional inequality based on perceived prestige (Orphan, 2019). Instead, it is predicated on a societal (re)commitment to supporting higher education access as a broader good than solely as a mechanism to foster professional success and a better life (Dorn, 2017). As such, scholars and practitioners may use *at-promise* to take up the call for institutional transformation in support of student success.

Declarations and Statements

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