What Is Student Success?

Success as a construct in higher education, especially in the United States, has changed rather significantly over the past several decades. Students are products of their society, and so as society changes, the yardstick by which success is measured will also change. (Dean, 1998, p. 16)

There is no universal definition of student success for higher education because there are too many complicating factors in contemporary society. When the trivium (grammar, rhetoric, and logic) and quadrivium (arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy) controlled the curriculum and what students learned in medieval universities, there may have been a universal definition of student success. Even when the early colonial colleges in America produced the clergy to serve the nation, there may have been a universal definition. But as colleges became more secular and more public, and as American society moved from an agricultural economy to an industrial economy and now to a knowledge and information economy, concepts of success changed as well.

One of the complicating factors in determining a definition of student success is that every stakeholder group represents a different set of interests and values regarding what constitutes success. Students define success in many different ways, as do their parents. Faculty, administrators, and staff define success differently; transfer faculty and career and technical education faculty use different definitions of success to reflect their program outcomes and expectations of employers. Institutions differ. Community colleges define student success in terms of their multiple missions, as do four-year liberal arts colleges and research universities. There are multiple definitions of success articulated by the federal and state governments, by business and industry, by foundations, and by policy analysts and researchers.

Further complicating the definition of success is the confusion between success as process and success as outcome. Some educators favor viewing success as progress toward a goal—as long as students are enrolled and not failing, they are deemed successful. Many educators today favor the view of success as outcome-based, and create outcome measures and

indicators as achievement points by which to signal success. Accrediting agencies now require all institutions to identify and measure the achievement of learning outcomes as the primary indicators of an institution's success.

Outcome measures and indicators also complicate the task of creating a definition of student success. Grades and GPA have long been the standards by which student success is measured, but they are giving way or being incorporated into more complex measures that are sometimes quantitative and sometimes qualitative. Some of the quantitative indicators include credits earned, certificates or degrees, scores on tests, transfer rates, graduation rates, retention rates, and job placement rates. Retention might be more appropriate as a success measure for prisons rather than higher education institutions, as it reflects merely the ability to hold someone in a place. Interestingly, it is almost universally accepted as a key measure of success in higher education. Qualitative measures include student satisfaction, comfort in the college environment, attainment of student-defined goals, happiness, appreciation and respect for others, a global perspective, and service. The recent introduction of gainful employment as a measure of success for those who complete credentials has added another challenging dimension to defining what success means.

Creating a definition of student success is also difficult because of the historical tensions between educators who favor a liberal arts/general education perspective and educators who favor a workforce training perspective. "Man does not live by bread alone!" versus "Yes, but, when he gets hungry he will need the wages that come from a job to purchase the bread," frames the dilemma that separates, in the community college at least, the transfer faculty from the career and technical education faculty. This is not a new dichotomy:

The ancient Greeks separated the arts into the practical arts, which prepared one for craftsmanship and trade, and the liberal arts, which were focused on the intellectual and moral development of individuals. Liber comes from the Latin word for 'free.' Hence, an education in the liberal arts was designed to prepare people to be free thinkers in contrast with a vocational education which prepares individuals to be skilled workers in a particular, specialized trade. (Courtney, 2012, para. 1)

This dilemma frames many discussions going on in education today—in institutions, in state governments, in foundations, in policy reports, and in the minds of students. After thousands of years, it is still a dilemma that creates an almost insurmountable abyss between many factions—even with numerous attempts to construct workable bridges across the abyss. The two views do not have to be mutually exclusive, but they are often cast as opposite ends of a continuum.

The members of the American Federation of Teachers "approach student success in broader terms than quick degree attainment or high standardized scores—they usually define student success as the achievement of the student's own, often developing, education goals" (American Federation of Teachers, 2011, p. 3). But the complicating factor in this definition is the extent to which the student's own goals reflect his or her own deep, personal, thought-through values and needs or whether the goals reflect the influence of the media, peers, parents, and other social pressures. Where does one begin and the other leave off? What is the interplay between how individuals influence society and how society influences individuals? In the end, whose values are truly expressed in a definition of student success?

Because of these and many other complicating factors, there is no universal definition of student success. There are, however, many definitions of student success, and here are a few examples:

"The definition of student success is that students finish what they start" (Law, 2012, p. 1).

In 1993, Chickering and Reisser identified seven different vectors that undergraduates should achieve as an indication of success in college: "Developing competence, managing emotions, moving through autonomy toward independence, developing mature interpersonal relationships, establishing identity, developing purpose, and developing integrity" (p. 14).

"Many consider degree attainment to be the definitive measure of student success" (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2006, p. 3).

George Kuh and his colleagues (2006), in a commissioned report on student success for the U.S. Department of Education, conducted an extensive review of the literature and created their own definition of student success: "For the purposes of this report, student success is defined as academic achievement, engagement in educationally purposeful activities, satisfaction, acquisition of desired knowledge, skills and competencies, persistence, attainment of educational objectives, and post-college performance" (Kuh et al., p. 7).

Vincent Tinto (2011) makes a point about success in the classroom for community college students: "Their success in college is built upon classroom success, one class and one course at a time. If our efforts do not reach into the classroom and enhance student classroom success, they are unlikely to substantially impact college success" (para. 2).

The Borough of Manhattan Community College, for the purposes of its CUNY Campaign for Success, defines student success as "graduation, transfer, and satisfactory completion of coursework, depending on student goals." Bronx Community College's Campaign for Success defines it as "improved performance, progress, and attainment, achieved through increased engagement and capacity" (Defining Student Success, 2007, p. 4).

This brief review of the complexity involved in creating a definition of student success and the examples of a few definitions of student success illustrate the challenge involved for colleges that want to better meet the needs of students and of society. The definition of student success is clearly in the eye of the beholder. In this review, we are addressing the community college as the beholder with the strong recommendation that if a college plans to champion the Student Success Agenda and establish policies, programs, and practices to create the conditions that can enhance student success, the place to begin is to identify what student success means.

From the very broadest perspective, I define student success as "helping students make a good living and live a good life" (O'Banion, 2016, p. 41). A more focused perspective that reflects the current interest in the Completion Agenda suggests that student success should be measured by increases in retention, certificate or degree completion, transfer, or securing a well-paying job. These two perspectives do not have to be in conflict with each other. The first addresses an ideal for bridging the gap between a liberal arts education and a career and technical education. The second addresses pragmatic measures based on current research and knowledge about what is important in the educational enterprise. One without the other shortchanges our institutions and fails to reflect their multiple missions and values. More importantly, when educators fail to recognize the importance of these various definitions of student success, they shortchange the lives and future of our students.

This article is an excerpt from "Access, Success, and Completion: A Primer for Community College Faculty, Administrators, Staff, and Trustees" *(2013) by Terry O'Banion, published by the League for Innovation in the Community College, Chandler, Arizona.*

Terry O'Banion, Senior Professor of Practice, Kansas State University; and President Emeritus, League for Innovation in the Community College

For more information, contact the author at League for Innovation in the Community College, obanion@league.org.

References

American Federation of Teachers. (2011) *Student Success in Higher Education*. Washington, DC: American Federation of Teachers, AFL-CIO.

Chickering, A. S. & Reisser, L. (1993) *Education and Identity*. Second Edition. The Jossey-Bass Higher and Adult Education Series. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Inc.

Courtney, J. (March 2012) "What is the Quadrivium?" Retrieved from http://towardthequadrivium.com

Dean, A. M. (August 1998) *Defining and achieving university student success: Faculty and student perceptions*. Master's Thesis: Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University.

"Defining student success: The starting point to institutional planning," (Fall 2007) *Together!*

The Official Gazette of the Hispanic Educational Telecommunications System. Retrieved from http://hets.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/4.pdf=

Kuh, G. et al. (July 2006) *What matters to student success: A review of the literature.*

Commissioned Report for the National Symposium on Postsecondary Student Success: Spearheading a Dialog on Student Success. U. S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Postsecondary Education Cooperative.

Law, W. (May 2012) A message from the president on student success: Five critical Commitments in the next 180 days. *President's Newsletter*, 7. St Petersburg: FL: St. Petersburg College.

O'Banion, T. (2016) *Bread and Roses: Helping Students Make a Good Living and Live a Good Life*. Chandler, AZ: League for Innovation in the Community College and Roueche Graduate Center, National American University.

Tinto, V. (2004) "Taking student retention seriously: Rethinking the first year of college." Occasional Research Papers, Higher Education Program, Syracuse University.