

# Views of Struggling Students from Historically Excluded Groups on Academic Success and Instructor Support

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## Abstract

This qualitative case study explored the perceptions of struggling students who identified as first-generation, low-income, and/or Students of Color (i.e., Historically Excluded Groups), and their beliefs about success, struggle, and characteristics of supportive instructors. Thematic analysis revealed student participants understood academic success and struggle in terms of *Identifying Performance Measures*, *Developing a Growth Mindset*, and *Integrating Knowledge*. Students identified supportive instructors by using one or more of the following themes, which were described using in vivo codes: *Creates More Motivation for Me*, *Puts the Joy into Learning*, *Doesn't Make You Feel Dumb*, *Not Here to Hurt Your Grades*, *Makes Material Understandable*, *Treats Us as More Than Just Students*, and *If I Ever Needed Anything*. Implications for practice include expanding the definition of academic success and engaging specific instructor dispositions and behaviors to better support these students.

**Keywords:** first-generation students, low-income students, students of color, college teaching, retention, academic success

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## Views of Struggling Students from Historically Excluded Groups on Academic Success and Instructor Support

Although any college student may struggle academically, Students of Color, low-income students, and first-generation students often face significant and consistent barriers. Students in these Historically Excluded Groups (HEGs) are currently at the forefront of university attention, yet retention and graduation rates remain stagnant in response to institutional initiatives (Gabriel, 2018; McNair et al., 2016; Student Experience Project, 2021). For example, at The Ohio State University, a large research institution in the Midwest, retention, persistence, and attainment for HEGs has been consistently lower over the last decade as compared to students who are not in any of these populations (Ohio State University Office of Student Academic Success Analysis and Reporting, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c, 2020d). Key metrics of student academic success include retention, persistence, attainment, overall grade point average (GPA), academic standing, and the development of specific academic, cognitive, personal, and social skills (Johnson, 2013; Kinzie, 2020; Ramos & Sifuentez, 2021; Renzulli, 2015). Institutions like Ohio State are making a commitment to identifying which HEGs are facing academic challenges and implementing interventions to help them achieve success.

Diverse undergraduate student populations continue to grow in the United States due to both shifts in population demographics and intentional university recruitment and enrollment strategies (Akos et al., 2022). Universities are under pressure to retain and graduate students from HEGs and to develop initiatives to address systemic barriers to their success. This change process necessitates an assessment of how and why students struggle in college. Much of the literature in this area is written from a student life perspective, rather than from an academic affairs perspective. Previous research has shown that students from HEGs often need extra support through an asset-based, holistic approach that includes their academic, personal, social, and financial well-being, typically requiring university agents, like instructors, to adopt new mindsets and practices (Blue Moon Consulting Group & Simpson Scarborough, 2020).

Instructor development programs help expand existing professional knowledge of issues of diversity, equity, inclusion, and social justice, and their impact on student learning (e.g., Iseminger & McClure, 2020; Nunn, 2019; Ryan et al., 2020). Instructors play an essential role in helping students from HEGs achieve outcomes (Bensimon, 2007; Delima, 2019; Schreiner et al., 2012). Yet there is a gap in knowledge of instructor practices that support student academic success, particularly around individual student-instructor relationships (Knapp et al., 2020; Roksa & Kinsley, 2019), especially for students who are already struggling. Additionally, in existing studies the instructor is assumed to be a faculty member, but students might interact with instructors who are staff, graduate assistants, or lecturers. This study contributed to filling that gap while aligning closely with the ideal of a student-ready institution (McNair et al., 2016). A

student-ready college or university focuses not on what students are missing (i.e., why they are “at risk”), but rather on what instructors, staff, and administrators can do to implement high-quality, inclusive learning (McNair et al., 2016).

The purpose of this case study was to understand how instructors supported the academic success of first-generation, low-income, and/or Students of Color who were struggling academically at Ohio State, from the perspective of the students. The specific actions of instructors (tenure-track faculty, lecturers, and graduate teaching assistants) were examined to understand how and why students in this population came to believe they were being supported and the perceived impact of this on their academic success. *Support* was defined as specific strategies enacted in and out of the classroom that help students attain academic success. Methods of inquiry included a qualitative questionnaire and interviews. The research questions for this study were:

1. How do students from HEGs understand academic success and struggle?
2. How do these students identify instructors who they believe support their academic success?

## Historically Excluded Groups

A historically excluded group is a group of people who have not been allowed to participate in American higher education and/or have encountered systematic discrimination due to their race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, or other identity trait (Bell & Santamaría, 2018b). We have chosen to use historically excluded instead of historically underrepresented because the latter recognizes low rates of participation without acknowledging the systemic reasons for it. This study looked at first-generation students, students from low-income backgrounds, and Students of Color. Table 1 defines these groups and gives examples of the challenges they face in higher education (Bell & Santamaría, 2018b; Blumenstyk, 2021; Carnevale & Smith, 2018; Educational Advisory Board, 2021; Gist-Mackey et al., 2018; Jehangir & Deenanath, 2018; Lewis & Shah, 2021; Mills, 2020; Nguyen & Herron, 2021; Quaye et al., 2019; Strayhorn, 2012; U.S. Department of Education, 2021).

**Table 1. Characteristics of Historically Excluded Groups**

Group	Definition	Examples of Challenges
First-generation students	A student for whom neither parent has attained a Bachelor's degree	<p>More likely to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Require remedial coursework or earn a lower GPA</li> <li>• Experience bias in the classroom and low expectations from instructors</li> </ul> <p>Less likely to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Graduate on time</li> <li>• Have a strong social support system or participate in the life of the university</li> <li>• Communicate or interact with instructors</li> </ul>
Low-income students	A student with exceptional financial need, whose Expected Family Contribution (EFC) is low enough to qualify them for a Pell Grant (gift aid)	<p>More likely to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leave college without a degree</li> <li>• Need to work their way through college, and have lower grades because of less available time to study</li> <li>• Experience bias in the classroom and low expectations from instructors</li> </ul> <p>Less likely to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participate in the life of the university</li> <li>• Communicate or interact with instructors</li> </ul>
Students of Color	A student whose racial identity is not White	<p>More likely to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Be isolated in the classroom</li> <li>• Experience discrimination or bias from their faculty, staff, and peers</li> <li>• Be subject to microaggressions or harassment</li> <li>• Encounter low expectations from faculty</li> </ul> <p>Less likely to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Communicate or interact with instructors</li> </ul>

We chose to focus on these groups because while Ohio State continues to enroll record high numbers of these students, the university also routinely struggles to retain and graduate them. At the time of this study, 46,984 undergraduates were enrolled at Ohio State's main campus, including 8602 new first-year students (Ohio State University Office of Student Academic Success, 2020; Ohio State University Office of Student Academic Success Analysis and Reporting, 2020a). Of those new first-year students, 24.3% identified as Students of Color, 19.2% identified as first-generation students, and 16.4% received Pell Grants (indicative of low-income status; Ohio State University Office of Student Academic Success, 2020). However, the university-wide retention and graduation rates of new Students of Color were consistently lower than those of White non-Hispanic students from 2010–2019, in some cases by a difference of 24% or higher (Ohio State University Office of Student Academic Success Analysis and Reporting, 2020c).

## Academic Success and Struggle

*Student success* is a broad term that encompasses academic, personal, and professional achievement. Despite the ubiquitous use of the term, formal definitions of it in the research literature are limited (Ramos & Sifuentez, 2021; Weatherton & Schussler, 2021). Institutions typically use measures like retention, persistence, and degree completion to account for a generalized concept of student success (Kinzie, 2020; Ramos & Sifuentez, 2021). Student success is viewed as linked to integration, institutional fit, sense of belonging, economic factors, and individual beliefs and motivation, which are straightforward and easily quantifiable definitions (Kinzie, 2020; Tinto, 2017). An increasing number of scholars call for a wider range of measures of success, including critical thinking and writing skills; cognitive, personal, and social development; preparation for adulthood and citizenship; engagement; and personal accomplishments (Hensley et al., 2018; Kinzie, 2020; Kuh et al., 2007; Ramos & Sifuentez, 2021). Furthermore, the typical measures are frequently based on the achievement standards of students from majority groups and promote a deficit view of students who do not meet these standards (Ramos & Sifuentez, 2021). A more inclusive view of student success takes into account how students navigate and overcome systemic and institutional inequities to attain their degrees, transforming their institutions along the way (Ramos & Sifuentez, 2021).

When focusing specifically on academic success, institutions typically use measures like completing all attempted courses, making timely degree progress and graduating within four to six years, acquiring a general education, finding an appropriate major, clarifying career aspirations, and completing academic enrichment (Akos & James, 2020; Kraft-Terry & Kau, 2019; Ramos & Sifuentez, 2021). We define academic success from an asset-based perspective (Schreiner, 2012; Skidmore et al., 2022). Schreiner (2012) used the term *academic thriving* to encapsulate many measures of success, including academic, psychological, and social well-being. Schreiner's research found the following characteristics of student academic success: engagement in the learning process, making connections to the material, staying focused and attentive, and remaining energized by the learning process. Students who are academically thriving show academic determination, motivation to succeed, willingness to work toward goals, and self-regulated learning (Cassady et al., 2022; Schreiner, 2012).

Academic success can also be understood in contrast to academic struggle. Indicators of academic struggle can include overall GPA; number of dropped, failed, or withdrawn courses; major fit; or academic probation status (Johnson, 2013; Rainey & Taylor, 2022; Renzulli, 2015). Academic probation status is a meaningful measure of academic struggle because it portends the possibility of dismissal due to academic performance (Hensley et al., 2018; Rainey & Taylor, 2022). From an instructional perspective, academic struggle could look like inability to grasp course material, not meeting course learning outcomes, low grades on assignments, or habitually submitting late work (Hensley et al., 2018). Academic struggle can be connected to poor self-regulated learning, such as inability to manage time, lack of self-efficacy, or low

motivation (Cassady et al., 2022; Hensley et al., 2018; Tinto, 2017). However, the literature in this area tends to describe academic success and struggle broadly.

## Instructor Support

Instructors play a critical role in helping students achieve success both in and out of the classroom (Bensimon, 2007; Delima, 2019; Schreiner et al., 2012). For instance, instructors are in a critical position to foster student resiliency, sense of belonging, and overall well-being (Means & Pyne, 2017). Instructor attitudes, perceptions, interactions, and pedagogical approaches directly impact academic performance and persistence for students from HEGs (Benson & Lee, 2020; Evans, 2020; Gist-Mackey et al., 2018; Schreiner et al., 2012; Turner, 2022). Students view instructors as trusted authority figures who can provide them with information, resources, and encouragement (Gist-Mackey et al., 2018). Instructor support includes proactive outreach, availability, inviting students to office hours, demonstrating a sense of care, including diverse perspectives in curriculum, encouraging students to use their authentic voices in assignments, and actively valuing students' diverse experiences and knowledges (Bell & Santamaría, 2018a; Castillo-Montoya, 2019; Delima, 2019; Means & Pyne, 2017; Schreiner et al., 2012; Strayhorn, 2012). Students value instructors who provide encouragement, put effort into their teaching, and hold high expectations (Castillo-Montoya, 2019; Delima, 2019; Moskowitz & Dewaele, 2021). Other instructor characteristics that motivate and support students include enthusiasm, humor, passion for course material, responsiveness, humility, kindness, patience, and approachability (Collins-Warfield & Niewoehner-Green, 2021; Hagenauer et al., 2016; Moskowitz & Dewaele, 2021; Rainey & Taylor, 2022; Turner, 2022).

It is important for instructors to adopt a holistic, asset-based view of student success, such as that offered by Kinzie (2020), who recognized “the talent development view of student success is about increasing the institution’s commitment to developing students to their full potential” (p. 8). This definition shifts the responsibility for student success to the institution. This is a more inclusive view that allows room for diverse student talents, experiences, and identities, and places the onus on the institution to create a supportive environment (McNair et al., 2016). As Bensimon (2007) stated, student success is “a learning problem of practitioners and institutions” (p. 446). Instructors have a clear role in creating this successful environment.

The scholarship of teaching and learning provides practical strategies for instructors to help students achieve academic success in the classroom. However, there is little literature that explores or explains how instructors understand success and how they help students achieve it, particularly for HEGs. Additionally, much of the literature does not explicitly include other instructors, such as teaching assistants, lecturers, or staff, despite the fact a wide range of instructors impact a student’s college experience (Bensimon, 2007).

Students from HEGs encounter a range of systemic barriers and inequities that can hinder their success. This is particularly true at Predominantly White Institutions, which have a historical legacy of inequities in access, retention, and attainment. However, when students' unique talents and cultural contributions are recognized, valued, and supported, they can truly thrive (Ramos & Sifuentez, 2021; Schreiner et al., 2012; Turner, 2022). All agents of the university impact student success (Bensimon, 2007), but instructors are in a particular position to support students because students spend so much time in the classroom (Rios-Aguilar & Kiyama, 2017). Through this study we sought to explore and identify instructor practices that support the academic success of HEGs who are struggling academically.

## Methods

This qualitative study utilized case study methodology to explore and describe the phenomenon and context (Stake, 1995). Case studies are useful for constructivist approaches because this methodology allows for capturing different perspectives and multiple meanings (Yin, 2018). This study was informed by a critical-constructivist epistemology (Jaekel, 2021; Levitt, 2021) which extends constructivism to take into consideration how social, cultural, and historical contexts inform individual meaning-making. Critical constructivism highlights how some forms of knowledge are privileged and others are not, which directly impacts the processes of knowledge production through teaching and learning (Jaekel, 2021). This approach aligns with developing a holistic view of student success (Simons, 2009) and allowed for collecting multiple forms of data to establish thick description and understand how students make sense of the world, while also recognizing their position in HEGs.

This study was the focus of the lead author's dissertation (Collins-Warfield, 2022). She conducted the data collection and analysis and wrote the original manuscript. At the time of this study, the lead author was employed as a full-time student affairs professional working with students from HEGs. The co-authors were the faculty members on the lead author's dissertation committee and provided support for the preparation of this manuscript. One of the co-authors also researches this student population (Mills, 2020).

## Sample

The lead author had direct access to and existing relationships with the participants in this study. This was useful for sampling purposes and for building rapport. Rapport is essential for collecting trustworthy qualitative data; it helps with securing participants, sustaining their participation, and soliciting their honest and authentic thoughts (Jones et al., 2014).



The lead author used convenience sampling to draw upon a population of historically excluded students who completed an academic enrichment program in the summer before their sophomore year (“Success Program”). The Success Program provided academic skills training, academic coaching, and advising for rising sophomores who struggled academically during their first year at Ohio State. Students self-selected into the program based on outreach and recruitment, or they were referred to the program by university staff, typically an academic advisor. For the purposes of this study, student participants must have: (a) entered the university during or after autumn semester 2018; (b) been a graduate of the Success Program in 2019, 2020, or 2021; (c) identified as a first-generation student, low-income student, and/or Student of Color; (d) been enrolled as an undergraduate at Ohio State in autumn semester 2021; and (e) experienced academic struggle. Table 2 illustrates how students self-identified with one or more of the identities that were the focus of the study. Pseudonyms were not assigned to students to help protect anonymity and because they were not the primary focus of the broader study.

**Table 2. Self-Reported Demographics of 21 Questionnaire Participants**

Demographic	Count
First-generation student	16
Low-income student	15
Student of Color	16
Two of these	4
Three of these	9

While data collection took place during the 2021–2022 academic year, students could nominate an instructor from any semester of their enrollment at Ohio State. This is an important point, because some of these classes were taught prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (before Spring 2020), some were taught during the semester of the forced transition to online learning (Spring 2020), and others were taught during the pandemic (Summer 2020 and beyond). The timeframe for the course almost certainly impacted a student’s experience with that course and the instructor, along with a student’s ability to perform successfully in the course.

## Data Collection

### *Qualitative Questionnaires*

Qualitative questionnaires have the capability of generating rich data if meaningful questions are asked and if participants believe the study is relevant (Braun et al., 2020). A questionnaire was sent to 143 students who met the sampling criteria. On the questionnaire, students were asked demographic questions to capture their identity as a member of an HEG. They were also asked to nominate an instructor who they believed supported their academic success, describe characteristics of that instructor, and provide their own definition of academic success. A total of 25 students completed the



questionnaire. Responses from four students who did not self-identify with an HEG were removed, resulting in 21 usable responses.

### *Interviews*

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with students who completed the questionnaire in phase one. Twenty-one students were invited to interview and 14 decided to participate. Table 3 summarizes the demographics of the 14 interview participants.

**Table 3. Self-Reported Demographics of 14 Student Interviewees**

Demographic	Count
First-generation student	11
Low-income student	9
Student of Color	9
Two of these	3
Three of these	6

A 20–30-min virtual interview was conducted with each student to gather additional data about why the instructor was nominated, including students' perceptions of the instructor's teaching style and the ways in which academic support is enacted. Table 4 lists examples of questions asked in the student interviews.

**Table 4. Examples of Interview Questions**

#### **Interview Questions**

Tell me about [instructor name].

- What were your impressions of this instructor?
- What kind of relationship did you have? How was this relationship established?

Tell me why you nominated this instructor.

- How did they impact your academic success?
- Can you describe a specific situation or scenario that you remember?
- Can you describe specific actions taken by this instructor?

What makes this instructor similar to or different from other instructors at this university?

## **Data Analysis**

Both the direct interpretation and categorical aggregation approaches (Stake, 1995) were used to analyze the case study data, including both questionnaire and interview results. Each participant's understandings were examined separately and then as a group. A constant comparative method of analysis was used which involves comparing

datum within and between collection sources and looking for concepts that are similar or different (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). A variety of coding strategies can be utilized with the constant comparative method (Saldaña, 2021). Data were analyzed using multiple rounds of coding. First, attribute coding was used, which involved coding for descriptive information, such as demographics (Saldaña, 2021). Next, structural coding was used to code and categorize chunks of passages in the data, which aligns with the categorical aggregation approach to analyzing case study evidence (Saldaña, 2021; Stake, 1995). Then a round of in vivo coding was conducted, which uses codes based on participants' verbatim words, followed by values coding to uncover values, attitudes, and beliefs. These latter methods reflected the direct interpretation approach to case study analysis (Stake, 1995). Finally, codes were categorized into themes that captured patterns of major ideas. Trustworthiness was addressed by utilizing triangulation, thick description, including discrepant information, peer debriefing, and researcher memoing (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Stake, 1995).

## Findings

### Academic Success and Struggle

The findings revealed three major themes that captured how students from HEGs understood academic success and struggle: *Identifying Performance Measures*, *Developing a Growth Mindset*, and *Integrating Knowledge*. Table 5 provides a summary of these themes.

**Table 5. Themes of Academic Success and Struggle from Students' Perspectives**

Theme	Definition	Examples of Success	Examples of Struggle
Identifying Performance Measures	Measurable outcomes of academic success or struggle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Earns high enough GPA to maintain scholarship</li> <li>Accepted into desired major</li> <li>Achieves desired goal (often B+/3.0 average or higher)</li> <li>Earns grades that reflect understanding of concepts</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Placed on academic probation</li> <li>Completes courses with Cs or lower</li> <li>Withdraws from courses</li> <li>Earns grades that are not personally satisfactory</li> <li>Believes more effort could have been given</li> </ul>

**Table 5. Themes of Academic Success and Struggle from Students' Perspectives**  
(continued)

Theme	Definition	Examples of Success	Examples of Struggle
Developing a Growth Mindset	"Learning new things through different challenges and situations and growing from them"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Demonstrates excitement for coming to class</li> <li>• Shows curiosity and interest in what they are learning</li> <li>• Perseveres</li> <li>• Maintains overall well-being</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does not know whether the choice of major/career is right for them</li> <li>• Lacks motivation</li> <li>• Unable/unwilling to give full ability</li> </ul>
Integrating Knowledge	Developing a thorough understanding of material and demonstrating commitment to learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gains true understanding of material</li> <li>• Progresses to the next level</li> <li>• Uses knowledge and material in life outside the classroom</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Struggles to understand concepts</li> <li>• Unable to immerse oneself in the material</li> <li>• Unable to retain/apply information once the class is over</li> <li>• Irregular or no attendance</li> </ul>

### *Identifying Performance Measures*

The first theme, *Identifying Performance Measures*, reflected typical outcomes of academic success or struggle. Grades are perhaps the most common measure, with a low grade indicating struggle and a high grade indicating achievement. The findings made clear that the grades standard of success and struggle looks different for each student. "It isn't necessarily about having a 4.0 or being top of the class," one student wrote in their questionnaire response. In fact, a 3.0 cumulative GPA or a B+ average were the most cited standards of success. Some students were focused on the specific value needed to get into their major (e.g., 2.5 GPA) or to keep their scholarship (e.g., 3.2 GPA) while other students were simply focused on making it through a course. For example, three students in two different STEM disciplines reported the goal of earning the minimum grade (C-) that would allow them to advance to the next course in the series and continue in their major.

Some students also shared a broader view of grades. One student wrote that academic success means "having an understanding of concepts and being able to show that in grades." Similarly, a student wrote that "Academic success is being proud of the work I have put in and being comfortable with where I stand in the course." Another emphasized that while earning high marks was great, it was important to develop an

“understanding that grades don’t define you or your intelligence.” Grades, then, were a measure of success that could manifest in different ways.

Grades were also the most mentioned illustration of student academic struggle. Specific examples included a GPA resulting in academic probation (2.0) or completing courses with a grade of C– or lower. Struggle also manifested as withdrawing from courses. Both a low GPA and multiple course withdrawals can lead to failure to achieve satisfactory academic progress (SAP), which impacts a student’s financial aid eligibility (Rainey & Taylor, 2022). Thus, one student defined academic struggle as “having an unsatisfactory SAP rating.” Other students defined academic struggle in more subjective terms, including not “having grades the student feels [are] satisfactory and up to their standards given their amount of work and effort given.” While grades were the most cited measure of success and struggle, students acknowledged that grades were one component of success and struggle. As one student summarized, “grades are a small piece of the puzzle.”

### *Developing a Growth Mindset*

*Developing a Growth Mindset* captures ideas around engagement, perseverance, effort, and motivation. As one student wrote in their questionnaire response, a growth mindset is defined as “learning new things through different challenges and situations and growing from them.” The theme *Developing a Growth Mindset* also incorporates putting in consistent effort when a class became difficult and trying to ask for help even when doing so was uncomfortable.

Well-being was an important component of this theme. One student wrote that success “also means that I manage other facets of my life (e.g., finances, mental/emotional well-being) in such a way that they contribute to my academic success.” Another mentioned “reaching your personal goals and being able to do it in a way that is not detrimental to your overall health (physical, mental, social, etc.).” Other examples tied to well-being included steady class attendance, positive mental health, and a student’s willingness to admit when they are struggling. It also included “having inner peace knowing you’re on the right path,” as one student wrote.

In comparison, struggle reflected the inability to adopt a growth mindset. Indicators included lacking motivation, poor attendance, and being unable/unwilling to give their best effort to a course. “I wasn’t the best with attendance,” one student shared. Another added, “in college, you can’t miss two or three days.” Academic struggle also manifested as low self-worth and self-efficacy. One student described her poor academic performance in her first year. “I struggled with self-esteem and with confidence in my intelligence,” she explained in her interview. “I just really doubted my ability to be successful as a college student . . . and I doubted my intellect.” These doubts can lead a student to question whether their courses and major are right for them—or whether college is even right for them. Taken together, these ideas indicate just how important a growth mindset is to a student’s academic success.

### *Integrating Knowledge*

*Integrating Knowledge* is defined as developing a thorough understanding of material and demonstrating a commitment to learning. According to participants, learning included gaining a true understanding of course material with the ultimate goal of applying it or using it in the future. “Academic success also involves immersing oneself in the material and effectively using it in one’s life outside the classroom,” one student wrote. Another described the workload of a class as “extensive,” but went on to say “it gave me a true understanding of the material. So that I wasn’t just doing the work, but I was learning important ideas to help me in my major.” For this student, academic success meant mastering difficult concepts that would help her progress to the next level. Additional definitions of success included participating in their own learning, developing new skills, and referring to what they learned when participating in job interviews.

Students also identified learning-related markers of struggle. The most common example was difficulty understanding material. Students described how frustration about learning can lead them to quit trying, stop showing up, withdraw from the course, or outright fail. Another marker of academic struggle is the thought of dropping out of college. One student described in her interview how she was having difficulty with her learning in two of her classes that semester and she “almost dropped out of college, [I] was really, really close to it. Even though I had straight A’s in high school . . . and I know college is different of course, but I didn’t expect it to go that bad.” The more she struggled, the less she was able to retain information, leading her to perform increasingly worse in these classes. The other key learning-related marker of struggle was disinterest in trying, which could manifest as lacking excitement for learning, failing to meet deadlines, or not putting in the effort one can give. Overall, some of the indicators of success and struggle were easily identified, while others are more internal to the student. Unless the student voices their learning struggles, they may not receive the help they need to improve.

The participants in this study presented varied and nuanced views of academic success and struggle. One student’s qualitative questionnaire response stood out because it captured all the key themes:

I finally allowed myself to benefit from my learning rather than attempting to mimic and portray what I thought academic success should look like. Academic success, to me, is being able to get the most out of your education while being able to give your best. The tangible success and good grades will eventually follow, but do not ultimately define academic success!

### **Identifying Supportive Instructors**

The second research question examined how students identified instructors who they believed supported their academic success. Responses tended to focus on either dispositions or behaviors, and both were essential for students to feel supported. Several

themes emerged from the data: *Creates More Motivation for Me*, *Puts the Joy into Learning*, *Doesn't Make You Feel Dumb*, *Not Here to Hurt Your Grades*, *Makes Material Understandable*, *Treats Us as More Than Just Students*, and *If I Ever Needed Anything*. These themes are organized in Table 6. In vivo codes were used from the findings to describe each theme (Saldaña, 2021).

### *Creates More Motivation for Me*

*Creates More Motivation for Me* refers to creating conditions that build student motivation. Students described how instructors' actions and dispositions helped them to be more academically motivated. For example, an instructor's reassuring attitude and supportive feedback made a difference for student motivation to keep trying. One student said of her statistics instructor:

The positive reassurance and support . . . it just really makes a difference, and to know that there are people who want to see you do good, it helps with that motivational aspect. And honestly it makes me care more because to see her saying like "Oh, I'm proud. You're doing great. Keep going, you got this," left me like, I don't want to not turn in the assignment, she's proud, I got to keep her proud, give her a reason to be proud.

Thus, instructor encouragement eventually led some students to find intrinsic motivation.

Additionally, several students were extrinsically motivated by the high expectations their instructors set for them. One student asked her math instructor for an exam study guide, but he refused to give her one. She recalled him saying "Nope, no, not going to give you that," which she said made her "learn the material a little bit more because you weren't exactly sure what kind of questions are going to be on the exam." The instructor communicated that he would be available for help, but he believed his students could do this on their own. This provided the student with the motivation she needed to study. Another student made a similar comment about her chemistry professor, stating "He made me actually kind of [think], it's not too bad. It's bearable and you could actually do it." This is another example of raising student motivation by taking simple steps to increase their self-efficacy through feedback, encouragement, and setting high expectations.

### *Puts the Joy Into Learning*

*Puts the Joy into Learning* refers to instructors' efforts to infuse teaching with personality and making learning interesting. Students nominated instructors they felt brought passion, enthusiasm, and humor to the classroom. Students highlighted how some instructors were personable and brought a sense of humor to their teaching. Students also appreciated instructors who were unafraid to be themselves. "She has an actual personality," one student wrote. Another described an instructor this way:

**Table 6. Students' Views of How Instructors Support Their Academic Success**

Theme (In Vivo Code)	Definition	Examples of Dispositions	Examples of Behaviors
Creates More Motivation for Me	Creating conditions that build student motivation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encouraging</li> <li>• Supportive</li> <li>• Reassuring</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Goes above and beyond</li> <li>• Has high expectations</li> <li>• Wants students to succeed</li> <li>• Puts in clear effort</li> </ul>
Puts the Joy into Learning	Infusing teaching with personality; makes learning interesting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enthusiastic</li> <li>• Sense of humor</li> <li>• Personable</li> <li>• Passionate</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interacts with students</li> <li>• Shows up as “real” or authentic</li> </ul>
Doesn't Make You Feel Dumb	Respecting students even when they struggle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Approachable</li> <li>• Non-judgmental</li> <li>• Not condescending</li> <li>• Patient</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Acknowledges and corrects own mistakes</li> <li>• Makes themselves available</li> <li>• Responds to student messages</li> </ul>
Not Here to Hurt Your Grades	Challenging and supporting students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Flexible</li> <li>• Accommodating</li> <li>• Helpful</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gives a second chance</li> <li>• Offers challenging curriculum with help when needed</li> <li>• Accessible</li> </ul>
Makes Material Understandable	Working to convey material so it makes sense to students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Communicative</li> <li>• Clear</li> <li>• Engaging</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Remains open to questions</li> <li>• Gives feedback</li> <li>• Makes accommodation for student learning</li> </ul>
Treats Us as More Than Just Students	Viewing students as autonomous adults with lives beyond the classroom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Concerned</li> <li>• Friendly</li> <li>• Caring</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Engages topics not related to class</li> <li>• Acknowledges the whole student</li> <li>• Makes personal connection</li> </ul>
If I Ever Needed Anything	Supporting young adults still figuring things out	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Genuine</li> <li>• Interested</li> <li>• Welcoming</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Says “I’m here for you”</li> <li>• Reaches out proactively</li> <li>• Knows resources</li> </ul>



He loved coffee, so every day he would come in with a coffee mug and he'd wear the same outfit every day. It was so funny and he's 28 years old, but he acted an old dude [sic]. And he would be writing on the chalkboard with the chalk and sipping his coffee at the same time.

Another student described the joy her math instructor brought to the classroom:

He was also very funny because when he really liked something that he was teaching, he would teach it really fast and be like, 'Oh my gosh, I need to slow down.' You could tell that he was very passionate about what he was doing.

Instructors who brought authenticity to their work inspired their students to enjoy the learning process.

The outcomes of joyful learning were significant. One student described retaking calculus after failing it her first year, and the difference the instructors made for her: "They made me actually like calc[ulus], and I'm not a calc person . . . So after I took that class, I was like, 'I would actually retake this class.' It was that enjoyable for me." Through modeling enthusiasm, her instructor helped her move from a place of fear to a place of curiosity and interest, which enabled her to retain material and earn a higher grade.

### *Doesn't Make You Feel Dumb*

*Doesn't Make You Feel Dumb* is defined as respecting students even when they struggle. "Some professors say ask questions, and then they get mad when you do. But he was definitely not like that. He was always ready to help you," one student said of her math instructor. Students picked up on who was interested in helping them learn versus those instructors who seemed to just assume they would figure it out on their own. One student said:

It's the way that they talk to you . . . instead of, it's like, "Oh, just do this and turn it in." It's like, "Well, this is how you do it." They explain, they make sure that you understand it. She would never just send me off [saying] "Read the syllabus and then you should be able to comprehend it."

Three students described how their nominated instructors did not question their intelligence and in fact helped them realize their own ability. A student gave this example from their math class: "They made me realize that I'm not dumb, I just had to take my time with it and really put in the effort and go to office hours and get all my questions asked [sic]." The other two students explained that they did not ask questions for fear of appearing dumb, until their instructors made it clear that all questions were welcome, even if those questions had been asked before. This created the sense that students were in a non-judgmental space where it was okay to make mistakes while learning.

Students appreciated instructors who brought a bit of humility to the classroom, who were willing to admit when they made a mistake. “She’s the first one to own her mistakes and acknowledge that she’s not perfect. And then it makes us as students feel more comfortable coming to her when we might not know the answer,” one student said. For another student, the instructor’s humility and openness stood out to him as unique compared to other instructors at Ohio State. “He would say, ‘If you see something I did wrong, correct me.’ He was [wrong] on a couple of occasions. He was happy to correct himself,” the student told me. Overall, students found that instructors are also learning as they go, which conveyed the message that struggle and confusion were natural parts of the learning process and did not mean a student was not intelligent or not capable of learning.

### *Not Here to Hurt Your Grades*

*Not Here to Hurt Your Grades* is defined as a balance between challenging and supporting students. This in vivo theme came from a student whose professor in a STEM class said, “I am here to help you. I’m not here to hurt your grades.” This theme does not suggest that instructors were unwilling to give students a low grade if they earned it. Rather, it reflects concern for overall student learning. This theme builds on the idea that an instructor wants to help students learn, not deliberately hold them back. The first way this theme manifested was through the notion of second chances. A few students spoke of instructors who let them redo assignments or submit make-up work. One student had messed up significantly on an exam during a mental health crisis:

I think our second midterm, I was just not in a good place mentally. And so, I did not watch any of the lectures and I just couldn’t get out of bed or go to class. I wrote on my midterm, “I don’t know any of the content, I just couldn’t,” and I just wrote a little excerpt about that. He reached out to me and was like, “Please reach out to me to schedule a Zoom meeting. I want to talk about this. I don’t want you to fail this class or fall behind” . . . he let me do corrections on the [exam] for up to 100%.

Another student pointed out that getting points back was useful not just in terms of raising a grade. The opportunity to redo work “was really helpful because not only did it help people earn points back, it also forced them to look at concepts they missed.” In other words, a second chance not only boosted a student’s grade, but it also built confidence and reinforced learning.

### *Makes Material Understandable*

*Makes Material Understandable* means to actively work to convey material in a way that makes sense to students. Several students referenced struggling to understand and remember content, particularly in classes like chemistry, physics, or calculus. These have a reputation for being “weed-out” courses, meaning high-enrollment courses where many students earn low grades. Students perceive that departments intentionally

make these courses difficult. Yet several students ended up nominating an instructor from STEM areas—primarily because that instructor made the material understandable. In a questionnaire response, one student wrote, “He made it easy to understand hard conceptual questions and if I didn’t understand something, he would thoroughly explain it in multiple ways.” Another important factor for students was whether the instructor would clarify why the student got something wrong. When an instructor took the time to explain why a particular answer was incorrect, students said they developed a greater grasp on the material.

Students were not unwilling to take challenging classes, but they had the best experiences in classes where their instructor was clear and effective. “She helped me whenever I needed it, but she also challenged me and pushed me to think for myself so I could be successful in the course,” one student wrote in the questionnaire. In an interview, a different student discussed her chemistry course and how she felt motivated to persist because the instructor made the material understandable:

Even though I got a bad grade, I was still working on it every day, just because I enjoyed attending his lectures and things like that . . . I noticed the time and effort I was putting [in] corresponded to the type of teacher I had.

The other most common way instructors *Make Material Understandable* was by frequently checking for student understanding. Multiple students described how their instructors would make frequent knowledge checks throughout a class session. A student who nominated an English instructor gave this perfect example:

If we had any issues in class or if anyone had anything they were confused about, he would purposely stop up [sic] and make sure they were understanding what was going on. That way everyone was on the same track, because more than likely if one student was confused about something, someone else would be too.

Students tended to view these knowledge checks as an indicator that their instructor truly wanted them to learn. Making the material understandable helped them rise to the challenge of mastering difficult classes.

### *Treats Us as More Than Just Students*

The theme *Treats Us as More Than Just Students* is defined as viewing students as autonomous adults with lives beyond the classroom. Students appreciated when their instructor acknowledged that they were a whole person. “Not everyone takes the time to understand outside factors that could be affecting your work or your attitudes or your spirits and stuff like that,” said one student. Another student had a close family member pass away near the end of the term. She was grateful for her instructor’s willingness to accommodate her. She told me, “So when I had to take my final, the final was actually on the day of the funeral, which he allowed me to take it the next day with

a different class.” She appreciated that the instructor recognized the significance of this life event and was willing to give her a little grace.

Interestingly, students in both small and large classes reported this idea of being seen as a whole person. One might expect that it would be easier for instructors to interact this way in a smaller classroom where they can get to know students a little better. However, three students explained that their instructors were able to convey this care for the whole person even in very large class settings. One student wrote:

Despite having hundreds of students, she makes a point to acknowledge we are all uniquely human and that different things affect people differently! This ultimately helped in my academic success because I am able to recognize that in order to give my best, I need to sometimes put myself first and make a point to take care of myself.

Instructors who adopted this whole-student mindset were also willing to engage students outside topics. “I feel like she actually wanted to make genuine connections with us. We also had time to just talk about life and stuff after class,” a student wrote. Students described various other ways instructors connected to them on a personal level, ranging from sharing stories about their own mental health struggles to giving out Halloween candy.

### *If I Ever Needed Anything*

One of the most common findings was the idea that instructors were available, accessible, and willing to provide academic support for students whenever they needed it. This is encapsulated in the theme *If I Ever Needed Anything*. While the previous theme, *Treats Us as More Than Just Students*, emphasizes recognizing students as adults who have autonomy, *If I Ever Needed Anything* entails providing support to students as *young* adults who are still figuring things out. Some students took advantage of this help. Others did not need much help but felt like they could ask for it in the future, and that meant a lot to them. According to the students, instructors communicated this sense of care in multiple ways: via email or messages on the learning management platform, verbally at the start of class, or through feedback on individual assignments.

Perhaps most importantly, instructors conducted proactive messaging to convey support. One student gave this example from her online class instructor, who reached out to students before the semester officially started:

She prefaced before class even started just, “Hey, I know this is going to be a weird start to the year, things are different, they’re always changing, but I’m here for you. I want you to do the best and if any problems come along, I’m here for you.”

That instructor went on to send an email at the start of each week that included both course content updates and messages of encouragement. A student discussed

how during each lab session, the instructor would “have a conversation with every person at the table and make sure we were comfortable or [ask] what he can do.” Another described how her instructor would tell the class, “I just hope throughout everything that you know this is not a journey you are expected to complete on your own. Please remember we are here to help you.” This type of proactive outreach was important to students as several of them described how personally challenging it could be to ask for help. “I hate asking for help . . . that’s my weakness,” one student said. They added, “I think it’s good when an instructor can realize, oh this student needs help.” Additionally, two students described how their instructors normalized asking for help by talking about struggles they had as students. The sense that an instructor was open and accessible encouraged help-seeking behavior.

These actions of care positively impacted students. For some, their encounter with the nominated instructor was the first real sense of caring they had experienced at Ohio State. In both the questionnaire and in interviews, students described feeling like a number at the university, until they interacted with their instructor. In an interview, one student described how a specific encounter with an instructor was her most meaningful interaction at the university to date:

I remember as soon as he said bye and started walking the other way, after we had left the building, I called my friend. I was like, “Whoa, you would not believe the experience I just had.” I was almost emotional about it, just because being at Ohio State, I have not once connected to anyone really like that. I mean I’ve had friends but not professors.

This student went on to explain how she thought her instructor’s caring investment in her success was the only reason she stayed enrolled that semester. While her example was perhaps the most pronounced, she was not alone in describing the benefits of an instructor’s caring approach. “I really felt they cared about my academic success and that I was not just a number, which can be hard thing to do at a large school,” one student wrote in their questionnaire response.

These seven themes capture the students’ ideas about how instructors supported their academic success. The themes reflect instructor dispositions and behaviors and capture a variety of pedagogical practices. In this study, the themes appeared across multiple disciplines and course levels.

## Discussion

The purpose of this case study was to explore and understand the strategies instructors enacted to support the success of their students from HEGs who struggled academically, from the perspective of students. Participants identified the instructors they believed supported their academic success and explained how they understood academic success and struggle.

Students offered a range of indicators for academic success and struggle. The first emerging theme was *Identifying Performance Measures*, which included earning a specific GPA to enter one's major or keep one's scholarship. However, students had different standards for measuring their success by grades. No student mentioned having a 4.0 cumulative GPA as a measure of success. While some mentioned having a 3.0 cumulative GPA or B+ average, others wanted to earn a grade that was just high enough to enter the next course. Signs of struggle included being on academic probation or losing financial aid eligibility. Given that all participants had previously experienced academic struggle, perhaps they had tempered their expectations or had a more realistic assessment of their abilities. More importantly, students indicated an understanding that grades were not the only measure of success.

*Developing a Growth Mindset* was a second theme, which captured ideas of engagement, perseverance, recovering from setbacks, motivation, and maintaining overall well-being. These ideas overlap with the principles of growth mindset theory (Dweck, 1999). According to participants, successful students viewed challenges as opportunities for growth rather than as indicators of fixed behaviors that could not be improved. They set reasonable goals, attended class regularly, and gave their best effort to a course. In contrast, struggling students had poor attendance, low motivation, and were unwilling to commit the effort needed to succeed. Struggling students also doubted their intellect and abilities. This concept of growth mindset also overlaps with Schreiner's (2012) concept of academic thriving, which includes psychological and social well-being. Participants thought that having a growth mindset was an essential foundation for learning.

*Integrating Knowledge* was the final emerging theme of academic success and struggle. For students, learning encompassed immersion in the material. A successful student mastered difficult concepts and absorbed important ideas that could help them now or in the future. Successful students also participated in class and developed new skills. On the other hand, struggling students had difficulty understanding material, which led to a vicious cycle—more struggle led to less knowledge retention and poorer performance. Struggling students were also disinterested in their coursework and were unwilling or unable to ask for help.

## Implications for Defining Student Success

This study helps expand what it means for students to be academically successful. There is limited research defining academic success from a non-majority perspective or from the perspective of students who are struggling. Existing literature calls for measures of success that go beyond performance and retention statistics (Akos & James, 2020; Cassidy et al., 2022; Hensley et al., 2018; Kraft-Terry & Kau, 2019; Ramos & Sifuentez, 2021), and the student-identified indicators of success and struggle in this study align with this call.



The students in this study repeatedly emphasized that grades are only one measure of success, and that becoming academically successful is not as simple as just raising one's grades. Recognizing how students connect with concepts of academic success and struggle offers the opportunity to shape how we promote intellectual growth, self-regulated learning, and self-efficacy. When a student is struggling with their grades, an educator can point to other areas where the student might be successful and encourage a student to draw on these strengths. An educator can also help a student understand that grades do not necessarily reflect the amount of learning accomplished or the potential for future success—nor do they reflect a student's self-worth, which is a message that bears repeating. The results of this study challenge instructors to look beyond existing deficit-based views of what it means to be academically successful (Ramos & Sifuentez, 2021) and to consider elevating strategies that help students integrate knowledge and practice a growth mindset.

### **Implications for Instructor Dispositions and Behaviors**

Students agreed that supportive instructors helped them move from struggle to success and provided many examples of instructor dispositions and behaviors that they felt indicated such an instructor. These dispositions and behaviors were categorized into the seven themes as presented in the findings section. Students described how instructors supported their learning through encouragement and reassurance, holding high expectations, putting clear effort into their teaching, and connecting subject matter to students' experiences. These dispositions and behaviors inspired students to be more motivated. Students also appreciated when instructors let their personalities shine through when teaching.

Students valued instructors who interacted with them with enthusiasm, a sense of humor, and a passion for the course material. Additionally, supportive instructors were approachable, patient, non-judgmental, and not condescending. Students felt they could approach these instructors when they needed help because the instructors were responsive and made themselves available. Students also appreciated when instructors acknowledged and corrected their own mistakes, which modeled how this was a natural part of the learning process. Above all, students appreciated instructors who treated them with kindness, acknowledged them as whole people with lives outside of the classroom, connected them to resources and support, and made personal connections. These findings paralleled existing research on the best instructional practices for supporting the academic success of students from HEGs (Bell & Santamaría, 2018a; Burke & Larmar, 2020; Collins-Warfield & Niewoehner-Green, 2021; Turner, 2022).

Supportive instructors made student learning possible by translating difficult course material into something more understandable. This was done through feedback, making accommodations for student learning, remaining open to questions, and trying more than one approach. These instructors were also communicative, clear, and engaging. Students had the sense that these instructors were not there to hurt their



grades; rather, they truly wanted students to learn. Instructors conveyed this through flexibility, accessibility, proactively providing help for challenging topics, and giving students a second chance. These dispositions and behaviors communicated to students that they were worthy of respect.

Students appreciated when instructors attempted to make personal connections and acknowledged each student as a whole person. These instructors seemed to understand that students' lives outside of the classroom impacted their academic success. Supportive instructors were concerned, friendly, and caring and they actively engaged students on topics not related to the course. This included spending time at the beginning of class checking in with students and asking how they were doing. Lastly, supportive instructors found ways to communicate to students, "I am here for you." They might communicate this message explicitly in class, but also through genuine interest and a welcoming attitude. Taken together, these dispositions and behaviors led students to feel like they could be successful in college, whether that success was measured by achieving specific grades, growing as a person, or accomplishing significant learning. This overlaps with Schreiner's (2012) ideas on academic thriving, specifically engaged learning, meaningful connection, and intellectual growth, and Kinzie's (2020) call for an expanded definition of success that incorporates intellectual and personal development.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

It is important to acknowledge key limitations to this study which should be considered when reviewing findings and considering future implications. Each student who participated in this study was directly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic at some point in their college career. There is a growing body of literature exploring the impact of COVID-19 on college student learning, which indicates the pandemic created more academic struggle for students (e.g., Kinzie, 2023; Kinzie & Cole, 2022; Sanchez, 2022). While specific considerations of COVID-19 were outside the scope of this study, participants' definitions of success and struggle may have been impacted. Future research will want to take into consideration our evolving understanding of student learning and developmental deficits that occurred as a result of the pandemic.

The participants in this study shared two common traits: they were members of at least one historically excluded group, and they were experiencing academic struggle. The authors of this study chose not to disaggregate findings by historically excluded identity due to the small sample size (see Table 2) out of concern for a lack of generalizability. Future studies might highlight whether first-generation, low-income, or Students of Color defined academic success and struggle and instructor support in similar ways, or whether different groups pointed to different features.

## Conclusions

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore the perceptions of struggling students from HEGs and their beliefs about success, struggle, and characteristics of supportive instructors. Some indicators were more tangible than others. For example, grades are external, quantifiable measures, while developing an ability to integrate knowledge is an internal marker. Furthermore, some indicators were easier to overcome than others. A student might work with an academic advisor or career coach to discover a best-fit major or career, but developing internal motivation is much more challenging. Similarly, the manageability of instructor actions depends upon the specifics of a course. For example, it might not be possible to learn the names of 200 students, but an instructor could ask a student their name when they raise a hand to contribute in class. Some of these actions take advanced planning, such as creating a list of resources, while others can happen in the moment, such as acknowledging students' responses or admitting when a mistake has been made. Nevertheless, these actions have been demonstrated to support student academic success and can apply to multiple disciplines, course levels, and modes of instruction (Burke & Larmar, 2020; Castillo-Montoya, 2019; Nunn, 2019; Renzulli, 2015).

While it is important to have broad institutional goals and aspirations for empowering students to achieve success, the changes we can make within our own spheres of influence matter too and can be done more quickly (Flessner et al., 2007). Instructors' everyday enactments of care can make such a difference for students. Quality, inclusive teaching matters, particularly for students experiencing academic struggle.

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