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More Than Grades: How Students Define Holistic Student Success

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Abstract

This study examined undergraduate students' perceptions and definitions of success and implications for higher education. Participants consisted of a diverse group of students from a large urban public university. A team of multidisciplinary researchers conducted a qualitative study adopting a phenomenological approach. Results show that students believed success to be a personal, expansive, and transformative journey with a focus on the future. Students' perceptions of success build upon institutionally defined metrics of success, highlighting personal growth, wellbeing, tenacity, the ability to give back to communities, and progress toward career goals. Our research illustrates that students' views of success are not ubiquitous. In order for student success initiatives to be successful, we recommend that institutions examine student beliefs within their own student populations. This study offers institutions new opportunities to be relevant and responsive to the unique needs of students in their particular student bodies.

Keywords: student success, college, retention, higher education, diversity, undergraduate

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The concept of student success emerged in the 1970s when institutions of higher education began tracking student retention. Initially, precise definitions of student success were limited or absent (Weatherson & Schussler, 2021). Over time, the construct of student success became more nuanced. This was a result, in part, of increasing enrollment of students from diverse backgrounds in the 1980s, a focus on first-year experiences that emerged in the 1990s, and the advent of data-driven technologies in the early 2000s that provided institutions with ready access to success metrics (Straumsheim, 2017). The development of the concept was accompanied by substantial growth in the study of student success, leading to much needed research over the past 50 years (Brankovic, 2018; Ewell, 2009; Longerbeam, 2016).

Evolving definitions of student success inform institutional policies and practice, which in turn lead to how institutions measure and then determine success. For example, institutions that focus on eliminating equity gaps devise policies and services to address barriers faced by minoritized students. Determining success for these institutions, therefore, is based on decreases in equity gaps. Success metrics and outcomes gauge both institutional-level success as well as individual-level student success and are often linked to funding. Grade point average, retention, time-to-graduation, graduation rates, graduate school attendance, employment, and earnings continue to be widely accepted traditional student success metrics at both an institutional and student level (Chang et al., 2019; Felton & Lambert, 2020; Rutter & Mintz, 2019). The use of these traditional metrics alone, however, minimize the complexity of students' lives and frequently ignore racialized, structural, economic, and institutional inequities (Ball, 1995; Yazedjian et al., 2008). The absence of student voice in the crafting of student success initiatives can result in ineffective institutional practices that run the risk of failing to benefit students. At their worst, policies and practices that exclude student voices and experiences may reproduce inequities and reinforce neoliberal norms and practices (Blake, 2023; San Miguel Bauman et al., 2019). Centering students in these efforts, however, offers institutions a deeper understanding of students' perspectives and needs, and can help facilitate the development of additional success metrics beyond the aforementioned traditional ones.

We also call attention to the ongoing bipartisan debate about the value and increased cost of education. These disputes should further prompt higher education to refine what success means (Nguyen et al., 2023; Pew Research Center, 2016). To help fill these gaps, this study explores how a diverse population that includes Black, Indigenous, and other people of color (BIPOC), first-generation, and low-income students respond to the following questions: How do students define success?; What are barriers to success from the student perspective?; and What are facilitators of success from the student perspective? Larger forces and contexts provide additional rationale for our research.

COVID-19 caused disruptions to education, which disproportionately impacted historically underrepresented students in terms of both academic performance and increased mental health challenges (Ihm et al., 2021; Reigada et al., 2023) and exacerbated preexisting academic barriers to student success (Broner et al., 2022; Yoo et al., 2020). As a result, we asked the participants the following question: How has COVID-19 changed students' perspectives of success?

Given the diversity of our student participants who were majority BIPOC, first generation, and low income, our research contributes to the literature by elevating minoritized student voices. In the next sections we review how changing demographics of university students present an opportunity for institutions to reexamine and reconsider what students need to succeed, and accordingly develop practices, services, and supports, along with metrics. Additionally, ideas about what could constitute an inclusive definition of success are presented.

Changing Student Demographics Reshape Student Success

Historically, students in higher education were primarily White, male, and upper class, which shaped notions of success specific to this demographic group (Ford, 2017). Today, college student populations are more diverse in racial and ethnic backgrounds, gender, and socioeconomic status. The 2021 U.S. Census (Fabina et al., 2023) reports the national undergraduate college population is 51.8% non-Hispanic White, 20.6% Hispanic, 13.9% Black, and 7.6% Asian, and the graduate student population is 54.6% non-Hispanic White, 14% Hispanic, 13% Black, and 12.6% Asian. Furthermore, student diversity is extending beyond race and ethnicity. Seventeen percent of students identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, asexual, queer, or questioning (Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2021). Fifty-five percent of undergraduate students and 59.5% of graduate students are female (Fabina et al., 2023). Fifty-four percent of undergraduates in 2020 across the nation were first-generation college students (Center for First-Generation Student Success, 2020). Lastly, the proportion of undergraduate students living in poverty has grown nationwide to 31% in 2015–2016 from 21% twenty years earlier and the increase in low-income students is most prominent in less selective institutions (Fry & Cilluffo, 2019).

Unfortunately, racialized, systemic, and institutional barriers continue to create challenging conditions for students. For instance, students of color, first-generation, and low-income students receive higher DFW rates (Welsh, 2023). In the state of California, Black/African American and first-generation students experience the highest rate of food insecurity (65.9%) and homelessness (18%; Crutchfield & Maguire, 2018). Challenges faced by first-generation students have been well-documented and show they are at a distinct disadvantage compared to their peers (Pascarella et al., 2004; Terenzini et al., 1996). Further, social class has an impact on student engagement that is linked to academic achievement, satisfaction, and personal growth.

Martin's (2012) research found that students from low-income families are less likely to be engaged in campus events due to obligations such as, but not limited to, work and caregiving, and therefore they report lower levels of satisfaction. Relatedly, non-traditional students who are older (25+ years) face considerable challenges in their efforts to emotionally and financially support families and simultaneously devote sufficient time to coursework (MacDonald, 2018). Given these changes, research suggests that institutional practices should foster engagement (Zepke & Leach, 2010), support academic and social integration (Tinto, 1993), provide quality instruction and meaningful interactions between teacher and student (Kuh et al., 2011), acknowledge BIPOC students' increased likelihood of experiencing social alienation and discrimination (Llamas & Consoli, 2012), and pay attention to bolstering institutional culture and climate that promote wellbeing and community (Porter, 2006). Furthermore, socioeconomic status, parental level of education, sex, gender, and race/ethnicity shape social and cultural capital, and therefore, impact student success (Yosso, 2005) and should inform our approach to the abovementioned institutional practices.

Additionally, the complexity of students' lives can facilitate and/or interrupt persistence in, or withdrawal from, college. Work, familial, and caregiving responsibilities can be overwhelming for some students, representing dissonance between their lived experiences outside higher education and within the institution (Armstrong-Carter et al., 2022; Zepke et al., 2011). Student retention could be expected to drop when institutions fail to recognize and honor the value of student's capital in its various forms and listen to students share what matters to them (Latino & Ashcraft, 2012). On the contrary, when students encounter meaningful mentoring from professors and community learning experiences with peers in the university setting, retention increases (Mishra, 2020). These experiences honor student values (community, relationships, social relevance of curriculum) and intersect with their own understandings of what is important in the world (Thiem & Dasgupta, 2022).

Toward More Inclusive Definitions of Success

Academic achievement (acquiring desired knowledge, attaining educational objectives, and gaining competency in skills, manifested by good grades) has been and continues to be the most prominent student success metric. More recent scholarship views resilience and engagement in educational activities as important as well (Garcia & Okhidoi, 2015; Kuh et al., 2011; Rendón, 2006; Schreiner, 2010; Zepke & Leach, 2010). For instance, a sense of belonging is viewed today as foundational to student success, yet institutions are slow to develop metrics that take into account more complex constructs and experiences (Gopalan, 2023). Importantly, student voices are now being included in some studies of success.

Previous research that asked students about their definitions of success is instructive. Across many studies, most of which are with students from highly selective colleges,

students most frequently view academic achievement (generally described as good grades) as most important to their success and identify academic engagement (involvement in areas beyond the classroom) as less important (Jennings et al., 2013; Martin, 2012; Naylor, 2017). Pressure to be well-balanced is felt by students at highly selective institutions (Kerrigan et al., 2017; Lipstein et al., 2023). Similarly, research shows that college students from public universities report that striking a balance between academic achievement and other commitments (being involved on campus, jobs, friends, family) is most important to their views of success (Yazedjian et al., 2008). In addition to academic performance, previous research reports that students have a holistic view of success. Their expectations of what college can offer are multidimensional. A strong social life, personal and professional growth, and future-readiness were identified as themes related to student success (Lipstein et al., 2023). Students entering college hope that extracurricular activities supplement their in-class learning and help them stand out in future careers (Latino & Ashcraft, 2012).

Sophomore-level students have identified good grades, social integration, and the ability to navigate the college environment as critical components for success (Yazedjian et al., 2008). The importance of social integration and connection with others was important as well (Harper, 2005). Furthermore, students believed the ability to navigate the college environment by demonstrating responsibility and independence was a necessary feature of success. Self-exploration (Latino & Ashcraft, 2012), along with the combination of meaningful work, financial security, fulfilling relationships, and balance (Blaich & Wise, 2021), are success markers. Experiences with peers, faculty, and staff lead to a greater feeling of community and belonging (Latino & Ashcraft, 2012). In interviews with faculty and staff involved in student success initiatives, researchers found deepened definitions of success that included themes of justice, civic engagement, and social and emotional health (Chang et al., 2019).

What is clear is that students' needs have changed over time and our institutional responses should follow, including the ways we measure student success to incorporate these newer realities. Overall, it is essential to adopt an equity-minded focus, along with culturally responsive and racially just practices that will lead to expanding definitions and metrics that meet the needs of first-generation students, BIPOC students, and students from low-income backgrounds (Acevedo & Solarzano, 2021; Kuh et al., 2011). Crucial to this project is developing a deep understanding and appreciation of demographic changes that are grounded in our students' lived experiences. Although there has been progress, much work is still to be done.

Using both student-centric and traditional metrics of student success to guide institutions of higher education to better understand the totality of student success may lead to more equitable access to opportunities and improved outcomes for all students and may better support currently underserved individuals (Chang et al., 2019). We posit that listening to students describe and define success offers institutions new opportunities to be relevant, responsive, and ultimately more effective in addressing the needs of students and fostering student success. The purpose of our study is to

elevate minoritized student voices from a highly diverse (BIPOC, first-generation, low-income) student population to better understand:

1. How do students define success?
2. What are barriers to success from the student perspective?
3. What are facilitators of success from the student perspective?
4. How has COVID-19 changed students' perspectives of success?

Methods

Study Overview

This qualitative study, comprised of focus group and survey data, adopted a phenomenological approach given that we aimed to understand the lived experiences of students and how they define success. All research participants were undergraduate students at a large urban public four-year university on the West coast. The first phase of research gathered large scale survey data (n = 1,075) that asked students to share their ideas of what success means to them. After reviewing our survey data, we conducted focus groups (n = 88) to understand more fully the constructs from the survey data.

The research was conducted by a team of seven students and four faculty that brought varied perspectives and come from diverse backgrounds. Our varied identities likely influence our perspective and interpretation of study findings. Three students and three faculty identify as White, one faculty and one student identify as Latinx, and three students identify as Asian. Three of the students are undergraduates and four are graduate level. Two faculty are late-career, and two are mid-career academicians. The following academic disciplines were represented by the student researchers and faculty: Child and Adolescent Development; Kinesiology; Nursing; Nutrition and Dietetics; Physical Therapy; and Social Work. To mitigate our subjective identities influence, we intentionally arranged for research teams to include White and non-White colleagues. To further mitigate biases and empower student leadership, colearning was a focus in the research process. Input and feedback were valued from each member of the research team from project development to analysis and lastly as coauthors on our work. Specifics about our methods are available at ScholarWorks through California State University (https://scholarworks.calstate.edu/).

Pilot

In 2019, a pilot study (n = 164) conducted at a large urban public university asked students to complete a brief survey: major, year, and short answer about how they define student success. The results of the pilot informed the development of the qualitative survey and subsequent focus groups, which explored more fully notions of success from the students' perspective. University Institutional Review Board approval was received prior to all phases of data collection.

Data Collection

Qualitative Survey

Based on survey responses from the pilot, all undergraduate students at the institution were invited by email in November 2020 to complete an online qualitative survey that remained open for 4.5 weeks. The email explained the aims of the study and included the informed consent and Qualtrics survey link. The purpose of the survey was to gather participants' demographic information and thoughts about student success at a large urban university through open-ended questions (e.g., *As a [university name] student, how do you define success?; Share how your definition of success has changed due to the coronavirus.*). The survey contained nine demographic and six open-ended questions. Additionally, participants were asked to indicate their interest in participating in a future focus group. Of 1,569 responses, 494 were not included in data analyses due to missing demographic information or in instances when more than half of the short-answer responses were incomplete. The final sample size was 1,075, of which 171 students expressed interest in participating in a focus group.

Focus Groups

The next phase of data collection consisted of conducting focus groups with a subset of survey participants (n = 88). Respondents who expressed willingness to participate were contacted approximately six weeks after completion of the survey and provided with a URL to securely register for a focus group of their choice on a first-come, first-served basis. Focus group registration was limited to a maximum of 14 individuals per group with the goal being 10 participants per group, which accounted for attrition. One hundred and seventy-one students signed up to join a Zoom focus group. The attrition rate was higher than expected; a total of 88 participants completed a focus group. Focus group attendance ranged from two to nine participants per group in one of 13 one-hour sessions. Each focus group participant received a $25 Amazon gift card as compensation for their time. Focus group interviews were conducted over a six-week period during February and March 2021. Survey analysis, focus group analysis, as well as triangulation of results were completed in November 2021. Member checking was completed in January 2022. Examples of the focus group questions include: *How do you define student success?*; *Tell me about the connections you've made at [university name] that contribute to your success*; *How have your thoughts about student success changed since the coronavirus?*; and, *Tell an example of how your learning is meaningful*.

Focus groups were conducted by two teams of three student research assistants (RAs), all of whom completed extensive training in focus group methods conducted by faculty involved in this study. During the focus group session, two RAs worked together leading the semistructured interview, while the third managed logistics, recorded the Zoom session, managed time, took notes, and helped guide the direction of follow-up questions and probes.

Data Analysis

A thematic analysis of the open-ended survey questions was guided by a phenomenological approach (Nowell et al., 2017; Padgett, 2009; Patton, 2014). Four faculty and two RAs used axial coding to develop detailed labeling for each question, and then selective coding to determine categories and themes. The themes from the open-ended survey questions were used to develop the focus group interview questions and to triangulate findings. Prior to focus group data analysis, each transcript was individually verified and reviewed for accuracy. Throughout the analysis phases, faculty were present in RA meetings to provide support and direction.

In the first phase of axial coding, team members analyzed data question by question to develop detailed labeling for each question. In the second phase of axial coding, individual team members reviewed their labels and combined similar labels into broader codes. The teams then moved on to the selective coding phase, in which they established categories and themes. The first phase of selective coding took place when team members came together to discuss and share codes they developed individually for each question. Each team reached a consensus about which codes most accurately captured the meaning of the data across their focus groups. These agreed upon codes were then conceptualized as "categories." In the second phase of selective coding, both teams came together to compare and contrast categories across focus groups, moving question by question. In the third and final phase of selective coding, both teams discussed the categories to develop a deeper understanding of how the focus group participants defined student success. These findings were conceptualized as "themes" illustrating connections across the focus groups and across questions. The final steps of analysis included triangulation of data from the survey and focus groups. By analyzing the research questions, including the themes from the survey and focus groups, final themes emerged from selective coding.

To verify the study findings, researchers invited all 88 focus group participants to join a member checking session. Three focus group participants attended a member checking session hosted by two RAs. During this session, the thematic results of each research question were shared, and participants were asked whether the themes represented their responses accurately, whether there was anything they would like to correct, whether there was any missing information, and whether or not they had anything to add. Participants stated the themes represented their views well and had no corrections or additional information to be included.

Trustworthiness and rigor in this study were established through RA training in qualitative analysis, adhering to a clear analysis process, triangulation of data from different sources, member checking, and practicing reflexivity throughout the process. The initial training session addressed best practices for facilitating focus groups, following a semistructured interview script and using follow-up questions to elicit additional detail from participants. A second training session was conducted to provide instruction on performing thematic qualitative analysis per the process outlined above. The

importance of reflexive thinking in qualitative research was addressed to encourage RAs to be mindful of how their relationship with participants, and their own experiences as students, affect their interpretation of the data. Regular team meetings were held throughout the process to ensure RAs were working in accordance with the study protocol.

Research Participants

Demographic characteristics of participants are presented in Table 1. Among the 1,075 undergraduate students who completed the survey, most participants were female, aged 18–25, Asian or Hispanic, and juniors or seniors. STEM (Engineering, Computer Science, or Biology) and Social Sciences majors were highest represented. The majority of the 88 undergraduate focus group participants were female, aged 18–25, Asian or Hispanic, junior or seniors, and STEM and Social Sciences majors. Based on information about the institution as a whole, the percentage of survey and focus group participants were slightly more female, slightly more Asian, and slightly less Hispanic (San Francisco State University, 2023).

Findings

Thematic analysis of the focus group interviews and open-ended survey questions revealed major themes that deepen our understanding of how students view holistic success. Participants also shared what they deemed as facilitators and/or barriers to success. Below, we learn from students that their views of success are substantive, meaningful, value-laden, and tend to focus more on outcomes as opposed to outputs.

How Do Students Define Success?

As student participants reflected upon what success means to them, they defined success as a personal, expansive, transformative journey that holds both intrinsic and extrinsic meaning that tends to focus on the future. Perceptions of success were also multifaceted, thoughtful, and deep. Participants, for instance, reported that success was not solely an academic goal measured by grades, but rather the ability to use their knowledge to give back to their communities. Participants across all focus groups described how a balance between academics and personal growth was critical to success. Within the following sections, we provide exemplary quotes that illustrate these findings on six themes: academics and more, personal growth, wellbeing/balance, tenacity, ability to give back to communities, and progress toward career goals. We begin with the idea that students do believe in the importance of academics but add that grades do not stand alone as markers of success.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Participants

	Survey Participants (n = 1,075)		Focus Group Participants (n = 88)	
	n	%	n	%
Gender				
Female	669	65%	60	71%
Male	336	33%	24	29%
Non-binary	25	33%	-	
Transgender	4	<1%	-	
Age				
18–21	529	50%	42	48%
22–25	277	26%	24	27%
26–30	133	12%	9	10%
31–40	86	8%	6	7%
41+	43	4%	7	8%
Ethnicity				
Native American	4	<1%	-	
Hispanic/Latinx	278	27%	20	24%
Black/African American	67	6%	7	8%
Asian	376	36%	35	42%
Non-Hispanic White	189	18%	15	18%
2 or more	129	12%	7	8%
Educational Units Completed				
0–29 First Year	176	17%	12	14%
30–59 Sophomore	120	12%	6	7%
60–89 Junior	336	33%	35	42%
90+ Senior	390	38%	30	36%
Major				
Undeclared	25	2%	5	6%
Social Sciences	279	26%	20	23%
Business	228	21%	14	16%
Science/Life Science/STEM	306	29%	34	39%
Humanities	217	20%	12	14%
Ethnic Studies	10	<1%	1	1%
Other	8	<1%	2	2%

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Participants (*continued*)

	Survey Participants (n = 1,075)		Focus Group Participants (n = 88)	
	n	%	n	%
Receive Financial Aid				
Yes	735	69%	-	
No	333	31%		
First Generation				
Yes	631	59%	-	
No	438	41%		
Work Status				
Not working	515	48%		
Part-time	387	36%	-	
Full-time	164	15%		
Living Situation				
On campus	39	4%		
Off campus w parents/family	712	67%	-	
Off campus w partner/spouse	118	11%		
Off campus w roommate(s)	170	16%		
Other	29	3%		

Note. Not all survey participants answered each question.

Academics and More

Participants across every focus group described how academics was a measure of success but added that good grades alone were insufficient as a definition of success. One participant explained "You know good grades are needed, but the most important thing, and what I think makes me being a student successful is really to get that literal knowledge out of studying" (FG 4, lines 220–222). Another participant commented:

> My parents, I know they see like straight A's as like success . . . That's like my success bar. I'm starting to think that like straight A's is not success, there's more to it. Everyone has like a different story to success in a different meaning. (FG 3, lines 47–51)

Personal Growth

Participants across every focus group described how personal growth was a measure of success, many times describing how that personal growth was evident in their lives:

> Grades and how well I do in school is one way I view success. But personal growth to me also means success because it shows that I have gained

> experience to better understand myself (who I am, what I enjoy, what I dislike, my strengths, weaknesses) and the world. I think learning about the world and challenging myself to face it is also a sign of success. (Survey, line 660)

Wellbeing/Balance

Participants across every focus group described how the aim and/or achievement of balance between academics and other aspects of their lives equated to success. This included ideas of wellbeing, happiness, and realizing one's goals. One participant shared, "I define student success in a more holistic sense, of like spiritual, mental, physical and like financial well-being" (FG 8, line 55). Another participant commented:

> Success, to me, means to achieve your goals and be a genuinely happy person with the successes you create for yourself. Success is created by defining/acknowledging your aspirational goals, dreams, achievements, etc., then carry that with you in your actions and by embracing each moment in life with an optimistic and ambitious attitude for you to create successes in your life both big and small. (Survey, line 952)

Tenacity

Participants reported that their motivation and determination were indicators of success. Persistence was noted in many responses including "To me, success means never giving up. Despite all the failures I have done as a student, I acknowledge my failures and move forward keeping going until I succeed. I turn my weaknesses into my greatest strengths" (Survey, line 194).

Ability to Give Back to Communities

Participants connected knowledge gained and subsequent ability to contribute to their communities as being successful. Students feel continued attachment and responsibility to their communities:

> But the most important thing, and what I think makes me being a student successful is really to get that literal knowledge out of studying. . . . it's very important to get the kind of knowledge and that allows me to be successful, helping and be successful or useful to my community and to give back what the resources were given me that allowed me to study you know. (FG 4, lines 220–242)

Progress Toward Career Goals

Participants also reported that success was being able to achieve their dream career and use aspects of their education in their career field. This frequently included making connections that could forward their careers, as one participated noted: "Being able to use the degree that you earn to like find a job in the career that you want" (FG 8, line 76). Another participant explained:

> In the last year I was able to make a lot of really good connections with advisors and professors on campus and they lead to a network and a recommendation and I got a job in my field through that network that I developed I'd say that was a good example of student success. (FG 3, lines 97–98)

What are Barriers to Success From the Student Perspective?

Students need more extrinsic supports for success from the institution. Many participants reported a lack of institutional support, especially regarding effective communication of the resources available. Many online resources available to students were outdated, creating a need for improved communication. Participants also expressed the need for more financial, housing, educational, social, and emotional support, which could help them graduate faster. Access to food, grants, and health insurance were also mentioned by participants as important factors of student success. Many participants mentioned the importance of advising in helping them select classes, ensuring they were on the right path, and helping them graduate.

Lack of Clear Access to Information

Participants noted lack of clear communication, such as "I remember during the orientation, I wanted to get involved with something. And it just said go to this website, and then look for it. And I looked and it's, it's so confusing, it's so outdated too" (FG 3, lines 422–424).

Financial Support

Participants commented that financial aid does not cover the cost of living. Specific examples from participants included: "Debt and cost of living outside that which financial aid doesn't cover" (Survey, line 240), "Not having to choose between paying between books and food" (Survey, line 224), and "Assistance from [university name] in finding, maintaining housing in the area, in the form of financing and creating more physically available—and thus affordable—housing opportunities nearby" (Survey, line 80).

Faculty Connections

Students expressed a desire for better communication and flexibility, specifically noting "If we could have that clear communication with our professors and our mentors I think that would be really helpful and lead to student success at the end" (FG 13, lines 51–53) and "Flexibility on the part of professors. Some of them don't see . . . how many different directions students are being pulled in right now" (Survey, line 342).

What are Facilitators of Success From the Student Perspective?

In answers to questions about facilitators of success, students included intrinsic and extrinsic factors that contributed to their success. Students' disclosures that success was facilitated by intrinsic factors such as being self-motivated and self-determined

included "My strong commitment and will to learn and succeed" (Survey, line 648) and "My family moved here for me and struggled so I can become someone successful and responsible. I won't let them down" (Survey, line 642).

Students also acknowledged extrinsic factors from the institution that support their success including programs: "There's like a lot of programs on campus that help us, like that provides a lot of support and resources like EOP, Metro, New Student Program, Health and Wellness" (FG 9, line 119) and advising: "My department advising and they helped me out tremendously they went over everything make sure I was good to go and if there was any questions or any problems" (FG 13, lines 271–273). One participant also commented:

> I'm currently in the program called SOAR Trio and they help first generation students, and academically with advising, and also you're going to connect with other peers who are leading same major as you are different majors. And that really helps me. Because, you also have workshops where you can connect with the community, and it's just a really great program. (FG 3, lines 112–115)

How has COVID-19 Changed Students' Perspectives of Success?

The pandemic impacted both the path to success and students' perceptions of success, requiring adaptability that supported new ways of learning and an elevated focus on wellbeing and mental health. COVID-19 was one of the most reported and talked about topics among participants. Students emphasized the importance of overall wellbeing, self-care, and mental health. Many participants stated how COVID-19 led them to engage more in activities they enjoy and find comforting:

> My definition of success had shifted a little more to how you're doing mentally. Personally, my emotions have been on a roller coaster since the pandemic started so I've begun to focus more on my mental health rather than worrying what my grades may look like. (Survey, line 32)

Another participant commented:

> For me, before my success was defined academically, and then being home, I realized that success can also lead to like my passion, because I had lot of time, you know, with online school, and I started focusing more on my art. (FG 3, lines 188–190)

Discussion

Our research was conducted at a large public state university where many undergraduates are first generation and who overwhelmingly work part- or full-time. As such, our participants differ from those in earlier studies on liberal arts colleges (Jennings et al.,

2013) and private selective universities (Lipstein et al., 2023). The common emphasis that students from these other more privileged settings put on the importance of their social life and making connections did not surface in our focus group conversations. This study illuminates how student perceptions of success expand on traditional metrics to include academics and more, personal growth, wellbeing/balance, tenacity, ability to give back to communities, and progress toward career goals. It highlights students' view of success as a transformational journey that extends beyond performative outcomes and highlights the inherent value of higher education and engagement in the world.

Student participants across both the survey and focus groups responses informed four areas of inquiry: students' definition of success, students' perspective on barriers to success, students' perspectives on facilitators of success, and how COVID-19 changed their perspectives of success. We also draw implications for planning future student success initiatives from these findings.

How Students Define Success

Similar to other studies, our research reveals that competing and contrasting definitions of success exist between students and institutions of higher education. While our participants at times rely upon traditional university metrics to define one component of success, they also adopt what we will refer to as "culturally defined holistic metrics of success."

The traditional university metrics are voiced by students as indicators of success, but as we note are frequently accompanied by the "and more" in our descriptions. These more holistic and sometimes culturally defined definitions include personal growth, wellbeing, never giving up, being useful to the community, and progress toward career goals.

Although traditionally defined holistic metrics of student success champion the personal growth of students, study participants additionally advocated for further exploration of their mental, spiritual, physical, and financial wellbeing. Students advocated for their wellbeing as a prerequisite to academic achievement and pursued knowledge within higher education with the assumption that both would afford them opportunities to realize their life goals. This included improving one's social status and mobility, promoting the needs of their family and community, and seeing the connections between one's career and one's community. While they recognized the importance of career readiness, personal growth also involved understanding oneself, being happy and motivated, having tenacity, and the determination to learn about the world. In essence, students offer a nuanced comprehensive definition of success that is expansive.

Just as previous research expanded on definitions of student success to also include goals beyond traditional metrics (Chang et al., 2019; Kuh et al., 2011; Latino & Ashcraft, 2012; Yazedjian et al., 2008), our participants see their college experience as an opportunity to engage in transformative work that involves giving back to their communities, achieving a stable career, and enhancing both personal and professional

development. Thus, higher education is an opportunity for self-exploration, to enrich life experiences, and to tend to holistic and personal development. This finding mirrors the work of Delahunty and O'Shea (2019) who found that when students were asked to define success, they foregrounded "immeasurable qualities" that went beyond personal academic achievement and resulting competition with other students. These immeasurable qualities must be explored with students to identify their specific goals, otherwise, as Tinto (2014) stated, providing access to higher education without support is not opportunity.

Barriers to Success

Our research revealed that students hoped institutions would understand their dreams and aspirations of success, yet many students recognize that their voices are not heard by those who shape policies at the institutional level. This is evident in students' stated barriers to success such as limits of financial aid, lack of support for basic needs (food, housing, health services—in particular mental health), lack of advising, and insufficient information on accessible supports. This study also challenges traditional Western ideology of succeeding without outside help (i.e., students taking the initiative). For example, participants expressed the need for more effective communication on identifying available resources, such as financial aid and housing. In addition, our participants emphasize the intersections of a work-life balance and their mental and or emotional wellbeing that begins with the "flexibility on the part of professors" and "would like faculty to care for students to care about their careers." Student persistence may decrease when it is perceived that colleges do not support students' mental and emotional needs (Gopalan & Brady, 2019). If colleges fail to elevate and closely examine the emotional and mental wellbeing of students, they are simply creating barriers to the opportunities and initiatives they develop to promote traditional metrics of student success in the first place.

Research on student success that includes student voices reveals tensions between institutional authorities that define student success and student interests. The past several decades of student success research brought competing priorities and discrepancies to the surface. At the intersection are institutional priorities and the complexity of students' lives, which assumes that students could easily meet the metrics of the institution if students' lives were less "complex."

Facilitators of Success

The student's experience is shaped by both their university interactions with other students, faculty, and support systems and symbiotic relationships in and with their communities. Their time spent in the university context is only part of the journey, and consequently their success should not be solely defined by traditional university metrics. Facilitators to their success include intrinsic and extrinsic factors. Participants identified intrinsic factors as self-motivation and self-determination. Extrinsic factors,

such as targeted student support programs and departmental advising, were also considered success facilitators.

Impact of COVID-19

Given that our study was completed during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is profound that despite the collective trauma endured, students still spoke of aspirational capital—defined by Yosso (2005) as persistence in pursuing hopes and dreams regardless of obstacles—and openly expressed their belief in their dreams during the darkest of days. The advent of COVID-19 in students' lives resulted in a greater personal interest in self-care and mental health. COVID-19 elevated the need to balance complex, often competing needs and reinforced for students the importance of overall wellbeing.

Institutional metrics of success need not be at odds with the metrics of success that students identify as personally meaningful to them. In fact, institutional measures of success are often dependent upon the extent that students are able to access the support they deem important to their success. There is no question institutional metrics are important; however, they are an incomplete representation of the holistic perceptions of success that students hold. Ultimately, students are determined to succeed and therefore will strive toward their culturally defined ideas of success with or without the assistance of their institution. Whether universities take an interest in understanding and meeting the broader needs students describe as being critical to their success is certain to impact the extent that students feel their success is either facilitated or thwarted by their institution. Given the variability in students' beliefs about success across studies (Chang et al., 2019; Jennings et al., 2013; Lipstein et al., 2023) it is essential that universities seek information from students to inform their student success initiatives.

The results of this research provide evidence that students define success holistically. This includes the importance and value of larger gains, such as the impact that pursuing a college education can have on making positive contributions in their communities and attainment of dreams and aspirations. Students are invested in the pursuit of knowledge that will afford them opportunities to realize their goals that extend beyond doing well and getting good grades.

Limitations

This study had several limitations. Study participants were students in a large urban public university on the West coast with a diverse student population and many first-generation college students. Therefore, it may not generalize to students in small colleges and private universities or to other geographical areas of the United States. This study focused on undergraduate students and therefore does not include graduate students' experiences and perceptions of success that potentially differ from undergraduate students. Distribution of the survey took place in November 2020, when COVID-19 was

nearing its initial peak of cases. Because of this, students who were less affected by illness, increased job stress, mental health challenges, family obligations and the like may be overrepresented in our sample. It could be that those who faced challenges in these areas and others may not have had the reserves to complete the survey.

Thirty-one percent of students who started the survey did not complete it, further suggesting that completion required more time, motivation, and thought than those students could afford. This particularly applies to participants of our focus groups (a subset of the survey respondents) in February 2021, which required an even greater commitment of their time. Approximately 49% of survey respondents who signed up for the focus groups did not attend a focus group.

The RAs conducted the focus group and member checking interviews in order to reduce hierarchical and unequal power dynamics that may have been present had the faculty conducted these interviews. Low participation in the member checking interviews might have been mitigated by soliciting interest at the time of or closer to the time of the focus group interviews. Relatedly, although the study design included ways to promote rigor, and all researchers received training in qualitative analysis, this phenomenological study may have limitations in reliability and validity.

Implications

The diversity of the university student body has increased decade by decade; views of student success have expanded as well and will continue to broaden as universities strive to embrace the pillars of diversity, equity, and inclusion. By working together, students, faculty, staff, and administrators have the opportunity to support success for all. When students' lives are fulfilled and they are given voice and agency, everyone benefits. Students gain knowledge and graduate, engage in careers and community, and in doing so, are better able to support those who will follow in their footsteps. Intentional institutional acknowledgment of student views and partnership with students around student success initiatives will benefit both universities and students.

With regard to recommendations, we call attention to the differences between our findings and those from similar studies (Jennings et al., 2013; Lipstein et al., 2023). These differences point to the importance of listening to and gaining information from the population specific to a university that is seeking to support their students as they pursue success.

We close with four recommendations for practice. Universities need to create initiatives that acknowledge and address students' desire to achieve success that is defined and lived through their diverse identities, culture, and experiences. This can only be done by seeking and obtaining that information from students. Universities need to seek to understand the important connections between grades and retention and students' need for support in connecting with faculty and peers, maintaining and increasing their

mental-emotional wellbeing, and in the provision of basic needs. Universities need to engage faculty in student success initiatives to promote students' self-efficacy, which is a predictor of academic achievement (Wilson et al., 2019). Faculty have significant interactions with students on campus through teaching and advising and are in a position to support them in a way that is rigorous and supportive. Finally, students need and deserve agency to help shape institutional policies that facilitate student success in a more holistic way. As noted by our participants, programs that make use of peer mentors and community-building classes are valued by students and support them in their pursuit of success. This necessitates an asset-framed strengths-based model whereby all institutional colleagues start from the vantage point of the students.

Future Research

Future research should continue to explore students' perceptions of success at both public and private institutions of higher education in a variety of geographical areas. Additionally, as society adapts to the new reality of COVID-19 as an endemic disease and the repercussions of the past four years on financial markets (especially inflation and market devaluation), meanings may continue to evolve. Continued exploration of students' perceptions of student success is crucial for determining the nuances of college students' perceptions of success and developing effective institutional initiatives. Linking research questions directly to retention efforts could promote an understanding of the student experience in the development of institutional student success efforts. Exploring how the role and work around student success efforts may differ for faculty as opposed to administrators can help us better understand and sharpen our practices. Lastly, including students in proactive planning efforts for success initiatives could better align the university's focus of success to specifically target the needs of students at particular institutions.

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