2019

How Should Institutions of Higher Education Define and Measure Student Success? Student Success as Liberal Education Escapes Definition and Measurement

Laura E. Smithers
Old Dominion University

Peter M. Magolda (Ed.)

Marcia B. Baxter Magolda (Ed.)

Rozana Carducci (Ed.)

CONTESTED ISSUES IN TROUBLED TIMES

Student Affairs Dialogues on Equity, Civility, and Safety

Edited by

PETER M. MAGOLDA,
MARCIA B. BAXTER MAGOLDA,
and
ROZANA CARDUCCI

Foreword by
LORI D. PATTON

St*y*lus

STERLING, VIRGINIA

value

STERLING, VIRGINIA

St*y*lus

STERLING, VIRGINIA

STERLING, VIRGINIA

© Stylus Publishing, LLC.

CONTESTED ISSUES IN TROUBLED TIMES

Student Affairs Dialogues on Equity, Civility, and Safety

Edited by

PETER M. MAGOLDA, MARCIA B. BAXTER MAGOLDA, *and* ROZANA CARDUCCI

Foreword by LORI D. PATTON

Stylus

STERLING, VIRGINIA

© Stylus Publishing, LLC.

Sty/us

Bulk Purchases
Quantity discounts are available for use in workshops and
for staff development.
Call 1-800-232-0223

7

How Should Institutions Redefine and Measure Student Success?

Student Success as Liberal Education Escapes Definition and Measurement

Laura Elizabeth Smithers

The question structuring this chapter begins with the presumption that we should define and measure *student success*. The perspective missing from this question is: *What possibilities exist for versions of student success in excess of its definition and measurement?* Measurements ask us to standardize definitions of *success*—say, four-year graduation—and work to produce all students in this image. As a former academic adviser, I can read a university catalog and tell you the quickest pathways to graduation a university has to offer. This makes me an asset to institutions that place a value on student success as measured by graduation rates, but does shuttling students to majors with comparatively lax degree requirements produce an expansive version of student success? I am the last person to argue that metrics of student success such as college graduation lack all meaning. However, when measurements of achievements like college graduation become the focus of student affairs practice, they warp our institutions and our students in their image.[1] I use *graduation* here as it is the most frequently cited definition of student success today, but this logic follows no matter what definition you substitute in its place. In what follows, I argue that definitions and measurements of *student success* construct student realities in ways that are counterproductive

to liberal education, and liberal education is the ineffable outcome of higher education that produces students capable of changing the structures of our profoundly problematic world.

The Association of American Colleges & Universities (AAC&U) defines *liberal education* in part as "an approach to learning that empowers individuals and prepares them to deal with complexity, diversity, and change."[2] When framed as an *approach to learning*, a liberal education perspective on student success emphasizes process and practice, not measurable outcomes. Accordingly, liberal education notions of student success cannot be defined in advance and cannot be measured through increasingly complex scientific and predictive metrics. As John Dewey noted over 100 years ago, the ultimate outcome of education is "just the process of living itself."[3] Contrary to calls for student affairs educators to come into cultures of measurement,[4] student affairs professionals must create spaces for students to escape such measurements. Paradoxically, it is only in the refusal of measurement that we create the conditions for students to access a liberal education. In what follows, I renarrate the history of student success in higher education through this lens, and I offer the following provocations for an everyday student affairs practice that holds student futures radically open: (a) refusal, (b) embracing alternative ways of knowing, and (c) the imperative to go rogue.

Student Success in Higher Education

Student affairs was born in the union of early advising services and the scientific study of student success.[5] Both halves of this union have been present within the field, with varying degrees of influence, ever since. Today, the scientific study of student success eclipses holistic understandings of students, instrumentalizes higher education to the attainment of scientific measurements, and in both perpetuates inequality and exclusion.

The Science of Graduation

The field of student affairs came into its own 80 years ago with several publications, including *The Student Personnel Point of View*,[6] that called for the scientific study of the new problem of student dropouts. Integral to this new scientific approach was the development and use of standardized student record forms. This standardization facilitated the comparison of student-level information between universities; in fact, the first scientific studies of students were single-year, multi-institutional studies.[7] Even with this scientization, early student affairs researchers did not think that the results of these studies could be used on their own to guide services. Scientific management

provided one of many forms of knowledge necessary for practice. For the next several decades, individualized student support and the scientific study of student progress were considered two separate domains of knowledge that were both necessary.[8]

By the dawn of the 1970s, this two-pronged approach to student affairs began to change. The first major synthesis of the student affairs literature, Kenneth Feldman and Theodore Newcomb's *The Impact of College on Students*, called for an increased use of longitudinal studies utilizing more sophisticated statistical analyses.[9] Shortly thereafter, directly citing Feldman and Newcomb's call, Alexander Astin published *The Methodology of College Impact*, a two-part essay that introduced the Input-Environment-Output (I-E-O) model to higher education research.[10] In this model, students can be understood as a collection of measurable characteristics upon arriving to the university (I), and the university environment itself (E) can also be understood as a collection of measurable characteristics. Under these assumptions, the output (O) of the university environment—student attainment of a specified desirable outcome, such as graduation—can be studied through scientific measurement, and university programming (E) can be adjusted accordingly to optimize the attainment of a desirable outcome. This methodology gave shape to the scientific study of college students through impact, or the measurable effect of the university environment (E) on student outcomes (O). This logic of scientific measurement now dominates legitimized knowledge production within higher education and student affairs. Twenty-first-century references to definitions and measurements of *student success* are extensions of this now commonsense science of college impact.

Student Success in the Twenty-First Century

Higher education's current focus on student success is due in part to the influence of *Learning Reconsidered*, whose object of inquiry is learning, and George Kuh's work on student engagement. *Learning Reconsidered*, the widely influential 2004 NASPA and American College Personnel Association (ACPA) joint publication, explicitly reconnects the work of higher education and student affairs to the education of the whole student. It does this through defining and measuring desired student outcomes to produce what is variously termed *student learning*, *transformative liberal education*, and *student success*.[11] Kuh and associates state that what matters in student success can be classified into three categories: precollege experiences, the college experience, and postcollege outcomes.[12] In *Learning Reconsidered,* as in Kuh's research, student success is known through Astin's I-E-O model.

Data-driven[13] research has become the commonsense method of knowledge production in student affairs, operationalized variously through the study of learning, engagement, student success, and other outcomes. This common sense governs the field to a greater extent than does any single definition or measurement of *student success*. When we know students through data, we know parts of students (e.g., GPA, academic standing, declared major) as extracted from the messy, complicated, and overflowing persons we know through our practice. Modern student success research *knows* and *creates* success through the optimization of student data points under the implicit assumption that practitioners, administrators, and researchers can manufacture success if only we can produce students with the right combinations of data.

Student success has also notably become the clarion call of many foundations and centers, including Complete College America, EAB (formerly the Educational Advisory Board), the Lumina Foundation, and Postsecondary Success at the Gates Foundation. These groups advocate for specific interventions to increase student success as retention and graduation through funding and publishing internal and external research. Some produce solutions that many institutions purchase for millions of dollars, at the opportunity cost of hiring dozens of staff, providing millions of dollars in student aid, adding orientation sessions in multiple languages, and so on. These foundations and centers host conferences and meetings of senior administrators on student success, and they deliver a steady stream of data-driven student success e-mails to inboxes across higher education. Student affairs professional organizations are also involved in student success research and practice, which reflects both the salience of the concept to practitioners as well as organizational ties to external foundations.[14] Not to be left out, the U.S. Department of Education has also called for higher education to shift toward defining and measuring student outcomes in the name of student success.[15] Foundation and government-sponsored literature on student success is abundant, and it tips heavily in the direction of data-driven research to improve retention and graduation rates.

Dividing Scientific Measurements and Holistic Justifications

Universities, research centers, and foundations across the country firmly believe that student affairs practice is or should be student-centered.[16] At the same time, educators and researchers justify centering data, or evidence, in the name of being student-centered. This is not student-centered practice; this is data-centered practice.[17] Student affairs educators are the final frontier of university employees who still know students as persons—rather than simply as data. Increasingly, in order to be recognized as competent, student

affairs practitioners are also asked to know our students through data and as data.

Placing the focus of researcher and practitioner efforts on the pursuit of predefined outcomes, no matter how broadly stated, limits success to what can be imagined in the present and achieved during the confines of the work. Alongside positive college outcomes like graduation are those that no one can foresee at matriculation and that the longest of longitudinal studies cannot capture. These outcomes live outside the boundaries of predefined outcomes and their measurements.[18] To engage these possible futures, a different approach to student success is required.

Provocations Toward Success as Liberal Education

Scientific definitions and measurements of *student success* produce useful knowledge but cannot by themselves lead student affairs educators to assist in the production of values that escape advance definition and measurement. Our worlds contain items we can code, measure, name, and predict, as well as items that are ephemeral, escape coding and measurement, resist naming, and exist in a possible future unknown to us in the present. There are (at least) two sides to student success: the definition and measurement of desired outcomes, and the wide open possibilities of success that we and our students can never (re)present as a present day measurement. The first side is marked by the manipulation of data to maximize the impact of the institution on the achievement of student outcomes. The second is marked by liberal education, the practices of success that resist capture by definition and measurement. A conception of student success outcomes marked by liberal education includes outcomes (e.g., autonomy, happiness) often in conflict with dominant definitions (e.g., credits earned, graduation). Consider a student who is successful by all current measurements but would rather be in cosmetology school than at your two- or four-year institution. I struggle with measurements that would mark this student's on-time graduation as the outcome that earns the label of *success*, while dropping out would likely mark the student's living and learning program, residence adviser, and academic advisers as deficient. Yet even considering such defiant examples of student success outcomes—outcomes errantly marked as successful that defy a student's experience or the reverse—does not fulfill the promise of success as liberal education. Liberal education shifts the gaze of student success from the definition of outcomes to practices of educational experimentation.[19] A focus on the practices of student success pulls practitioners away from data and toward their university communities. This is a success that is made in

and through communities of practice, influenced by but irreducible to any retention rate, predictive analytic, practitioner, or budget line. Student success as liberal education paradoxically holds open possibilities for the attainment of *student success* outcomes that include and are in excess of *retention and graduation*.

Student success pursued overwhelmingly through prescriptive outcomes or metrics denies our students a liberal education and accordingly the open futures they deserve and our world so desperately needs. I have no set of prescriptions for practitioners to get outside of this; prescriptions are the problem. In what follows, I offer a few provocations and experimentations for new and established student affairs educators interested in creating their students, departments and universities differently.

Refusal

I am willing to bet that new student affairs professionals know that their students are more than their measurements in short order of the start of their first graduate assistantship. I am also willing to bet that those with years of experience in student-facing student affairs positions recognize that the measurements that shape their work do not fully capture the students with whom they work. From my own experience, I realized as both a graduate assistant and a supervisor that student-level measurements were insufficient sources of knowledge about the students with whom I worked. However, without another language of valid practice, I centered student-level measurements of success—or risk—in my time as a practitioner. One possible way to center success as liberal education is to refuse such measurements and honor our knowledge that something is not quite complete with the depiction of our students that measurements provide, or the worlds that measurements reshape in our institutions. Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang name the importance of refusal in ending the reproduction of settler colonial futures in education, contending that "refusal is a generative stance, not just a 'no,' but a starting place for other qualitative analyses and interpretations of data."[20] Refusal in student affairs practice can open up the space required to practice student success differently. Programs that refuse to use predictive analytics or standard student information system data to gather their participants take a step toward seeing their offices' constituents and communities differently. For example, career services educators who refuse to use tagged student interest data to target outreach open space for students to see themselves differently within potential career fields. One strategy to begin to create student success differently is to refuse its scientific operation.

Embracing Alternative Ways of Knowing

To grant validity only to knowledge produced within scientific or quasiscientific studies is to subordinate the knowledges contained within communities of practice as well as Latinx, queer, Black, indigenous, and borderlands ways of knowing.[21] This subordination of knowledges is dismissive at best, and profoundly racist, sexist, and cisheteronormative at its core. Scientific knowledge created queer folks as deviant and produced scientific racism through the eugenics movement. In fact, founding student affairs documents explicitly connect our field with scientific racism, stating that the responsibility of those in student affairs to the individual student and the scientific study of the student was in fact a "dual responsibility: to the welfare of the individual as well as to the culture and learning of the race."[22] Scientific data collection and production shaped our modern understanding of nationality as well as nationalism and xenophobia.[23] We recognize these shortcomings of scientific measurement, yet we continue to let science dictate which students are most in need of advising support, which students are most likely to graduate with a microgrant from the university, and what cocurricular changes will best support student success as four-year graduation. A focus on student success as liberal education might draw upon queer theory's treatment of identity as fluid, in contrast to the fixed and measurable frameworks of identity prevalent in I-E-O impact studies, to design programs that support the student transition to university.[24] A practice of student success as liberal education might include knowledges from ethnic studies in organizational decision-making before implementing suggestions from EAB policy audits.[25] Practices of student success as liberal education would experiment with ways of knowing student achievement outside of grades and credit accumulation. None of these suggestions are codeable within university databases; none create knowledges that are easy to extract from their environments and distribute to offices around campus. This is precisely the point. Data-driven systems will chug along, feeding neoliberal imperatives for data-informed decision-making. In their interstices, student affairs educators who engage students with knowledges and practices that resist extraction as data points engage in the practice of liberal education.

The Imperative to Go Rogue

To begin a student affairs practice outside of measurement, practice outside of measurement. Utilizing alternate ways of knowing and being will render you invisible to data extraction in the most productive of ways. To produce students capable of creating our world differently, go rogue; enact an "ongoing experiment with the informal."[26] In your work as an adviser, find ways

to know which students are most in need of your time outside of at-risk metrics. Center your community-building with students, practitioners, and faculty across campus, and come into your advising loads through these relationships. If you work in cultural centers, work with your communities in ways that are occasionally invisible to administrators who treat your work as data points to include in marketing materials. If you currently work alongside cultural centers, ask around. Chances are your colleagues' offices already engage in such rogue conduct as a means of survival and resistance.[27] If you work in student conduct, try restorative justice practices outside of your university's academic honesty procedures and deny the data points of failure in student records. This flies in the face of what administrators likely want or require of you; as such, rogue practices place you in a precarious position. Those who occupy bodies, identities, and positions of power hold the largest responsibility to go rogue. For those who occupy bodies and identities that already render them precarious, lean on coalitions of practitioners to cocreate rogue spaces. Going rogue does not require that you confess your rogue transgressions. Going rogue means capitalizing on the invisibility of practices outside of data to create university environments, and the students who come into relation with them, differently.

Our systems of measuring student success create the conditions necessary for institutions of higher education to become credentialing factories. We believe in graduation as an outcome because of its association with all sorts of positive outcomes. However, in the rush to produce graduates and other definable and measurable values of higher education, we sideline those values that carry the potential to create students capable of making our world different. If you think that what makes a student successful exceeds what we can possibly measure, then go rogue.

Futures of Measurement and Excess

Measurement of student success is a way to know, within the boundaries of measurement science, if desired outcomes are achieved. Student success as liberal education shifts the focus of the field from knowledge to practice, and in doing so, produces encounters with success that escape definition and measurement.[28] These encounters are not in need of replacement with science. They are the production of student success as liberal education, the practices of success that a focus on our relationships with students outside of definition and measurement incites. Institutional student success initiatives that crowd out the exploration of this excess of measurement fail to live up to the holistic aims of the field.[29]

Student affairs must work in the interstices of cultures of data, evidence, and accountability that lend legitimacy only to outcomes that can be defined in advance and measured. In doing so, we practice a student success that queers data-driven practice beyond easy recognition. The next generation of student success work must emphasize local student affairs practices that live in an unyielding experimentation. We presently spend far too much time perfecting our definitions and measurements of student success on the bodies of students to the exclusion of experimentations with practices that carry expansive possibilities of successes that escape all attempts to advance definition and measurement. Our current challenge is not to replace student success measurements with pure experimentation, but to tip current data-driven practices away from bounded productions of success and toward visions of success rooted in the unbounded possibilities of liberal education.

Discussion Questions

1. What values do you place on the college experience?
2. What do current definitions and measurements of student success produce?
3. Where current definitions and measurements cannot produce your values, how might you alter your practice?

Notes

1. cf. Barad, K. (2003). Posthumanist performativity: Toward an understanding of how matter comes to matter. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society, 28*(3), 801–831.

2. AAC&U. (2017). What is a 21st century liberal education? *Liberal Education and America's Promise*. Retrieved from https://www.aacu.org/leap/what-is-a-liberal-education, para. 1.

3. Dewey, J. (1916). *Democracy and education: An introduction to the philosophy of education.* New York, NY: Macmillian, p. 281.

4. cf. Culp, M. M., & Dungy, G. J. (2012). *Building a culture of evidence in student affairs: A guide for leaders and practitioners*. Washington DC: NASPA—Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education.

5. cf. the Foreword in ACE. (1937). *The student personnel point of view* (American Council on Education [ACE] Studies, Series 1, Vol. 1, No. 3). Washington DC: ACE. Retrieved from https://www.naspa.org/images/uploads/main/Student_Personnel_Point_of_View_1937.pdf

6. American Council on Education. (1949). *The student personnel point of view* (American Council on Education Studies, Series 6, No. 13). Washington

DC: ACE. Retrieved from https://www.naspa.org/images/uploads/main/Student_Personnel_Point_of_View_1949.pdf

7. Hopkins, L. B. (1926). Personnel procedure in education: Observations and conclusions resulting from visits to fourteen institutions of higher learning. *The Educational Record Supplement no. 3*. Washington DC: American Council on Education [ACE]; McNeely, J. H. (1938). *College student mortality* (Office of Education Bulletin 1937, No. 11). Washington DC: Government Printing Office.

8. American Council on Education, *The student personnel point of view.*

9. Feldman, K. A. & Newcomb, T. M. (1969). *The impact of college on students: Vol. 1, An analysis of four decades of research*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

10. Astin, A. W. (1970). The methodology of college impact, part one. *Sociology of Education, 43*(3), 223–254; Astin, A. W. (1970). The methodology of college impact, part two. *Sociology of Education, 43*(4), 437–450.

11. National Association of Student Personnel Administrators [NASPA] and American College Personnel Administrators [ACPA]. (2004). *Learning reconsidered: A campus-wide focus on the student experience*. Washington DC: NASPA. Retrieved from https://www.naspa.org/images/uploads/main/Learning_Reconsidered_Report.pdf

12. Kuh, G. D., Kinzie, J., Buckley, J. A., Bridges, B. K., & Hayek, J. C. (2006). *What matters to student success: A review of the literature*. Washington DC: National Postsecondary Education Cooperative. Retrieved from https://www.ue.ucsc.edu/sites/default/files/WhatMattersStudentSuccess(Kuh,July2006).pdf

13. Or data-informed, these terms do the same work as it relates to my analysis. cf. McCormick, A. C., & McClenney, K. (2012). Will these trees *ever* bear fruit? A response to the special issue on student engagement. *The Review of Higher Education, 35*(2), 307–333.

14. Burke, M., Parnell, A., Wesaw, A., & Kruger, K. (2017). *Predictive analysis of student data: A focus on engagement and behavior*. Washington DC: NASPA—Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education. Retrieved from https://www.naspa.org/images/uploads/main/PREDICTIVE_FULL_4-7-17_DOWNLOAD.pdf

15. U.S. Department of Education. (2015). *Fact sheet: Focusing higher education on student success* [Press release]. Retrieved from https://www.ed.gov/news/press-releases/fact-sheet-focusing-higher-education-student-success

16. *Student-centered* appears in the mission statements and statements of core values of the student affairs units at many American universities. For an example of a research center and a foundation teaming up to promote student-centered practice, see ACE (2017, July 10). ACE, Lumina Foundation to establish Alliance for Global Innovation in Tertiary Education. *American Council on Education*. Retrieved from http://www.acenet.edu/news-room/Pages/ACE-Lumina-Foundation-to-Establish-Alliance-for-Global-Innovation-in-Tertiary-Education.aspx

17. cf. Deleuze, G. (1992). Postscript on the societies of control. *October, 59*, 3–7.

18. cf. Deleuze, G. (1990). *The logic of sense*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press; Springgay, S., & Truman, S. E. (2017). On the need for methods beyond proceduralism: Speculative middles, (in)tensions, and response-ability in research. *Qualitative Inquiry, 24*(3), 203–214.

19. Manning, E. (2016). *The minor gesture*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press; Mazzei, L. A. (2017). Following the contour of concepts toward a *minor inquiry*. *Qualitative Inquiry, 23*(9): 675–685; Springgay & Truman, On the need for methods beyond proceduralism.

20. Tuck, E., & Yang, K. W. (2014). Unbecoming claims: Pedagogies of refusal in qualitative research. *Qualitative Inquiry, 20*(6), 811–818, p. 812.

21. Anzaldúa, G. (1987). *Borderlands/la frontera: The new mestiza*. San Francisco, CA: Aunt Lute Books.

22. Lloyd-Jones, E. M., & Smith, M. R. (1938). *A student personnel program for higher education*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill, pp. 38–39.

23. Ngai, N. M. (2004). *Impossible subjects: Illegal aliens and the making of modern America.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

24. cf. Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. New York, NY: Routledge.

25. Ethnic studies is my colloquial approximation of Roderick Ferguson's *interdisciplines*; cf. Ferguson, R. A. (2012). *The reorder of things: The university and its pedagogies of minority difference*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press; EAB. (2016, April 19). *Academic policy audit: Tools for identifying and prioritizing institutional barriers to success*. Retrieved from https://www.eab.com/research-and-insights/academic-affairs-forum/toolkits/academic-policy-diagnostic

26. Harney, S., & Moten, F. (2013). *The undercommons: Fugitive planning and black study*. Wivenhoe, UK: Minor Compositions, p. 74.

27. Also known as *survivance*; cf. Brayboy, B. M. J. (2006). Toward a tribal critical race theory in education. *The Urban Review, 37*(5), 425–446.

28. The arguments here lean heavily on assemblage theory; cf. Deleuze, G., & Guattari, F. (1987). *A thousand plateaus: Capitalism and schizophrenia*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

29. Baxter Magolda, M. B. (2009). The activity of meaning making: A holistic perspective on college student development. *Journal of College Student Development, 50*(6), 621–639; as read through Deleuze, *The logic of sense*.