

## Student “Success”: A Christian Reflection on Modern Definitions

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*This post was adapted from a longer white paper for Christian practitioners working in student success offices. For those working in student success offices interested in joining the conversation, please contact [email].*

Helping students achieve “success” is an increasingly important topic within the research and practice of higher education. In addition to helping students accomplish personal goals, institutional leaders are motivated to hit certain retention and graduation thresholds in order to maintain tuition revenue streams and prestigious metrics. Although these metrics specify presumably favorable outcomes in the short-term (e.g. retention, campus engagement, graduation, job placement), current scholarship often neglects the ends towards which these outcomes are (or ought to be) aimed. As a colleague of ours said the other day, “success for what purpose and toward what end?”<sup>1</sup>

What is a successful student? We believe this question is one of the central problems higher education has faced since its inception. One of the first college administrators, Hugh of St. Victor suggested the goal of education (in the form of the liberal arts) was to order student loves in order “to restore within [them] the divine likeness” that was marred by the Fall.<sup>2</sup> Since that time, higher education has taken on a number of forms, each with its own way of defining student success—successful students were good humanists, good citizens, or good leaders.<sup>3</sup> As noted above, today’s definitions of student success have become increasingly linked to quantitative outcomes and the practical utility of a degree.<sup>4</sup> Students determine if they are successful with answers to questions like, Will I be equipped for a job? How much money will that job make out of college? Over a lifetime? These questions seem to suggest that students are customers on the hunt for “goods” which can only be attained after earning the credential college provides.

Although critiquing the utilitarian view of education is nothing new, today’s forms of utilitarian thinking are marked by more modern, individualistic impulses.<sup>5</sup> To view education in this way perpetuates, as James K.A. Smith describes, “an egocentric way of looking at the world, as if all these things were there for me, and for me to do with them as I please.”<sup>6</sup>

I suspect many reading this are, at this point, nodding their heads in agreement with the shortcomings of current definitions of success. But before we place the blame fully on students (faulty as their consumeristic approaches may be), or “culture” (faulty as some underlying ideologies may be), we must begin with some self-reflection. In what ways have we as staff and faculty perpetuated such a consumeristic view of students in how we evaluate them? What elements of our student success initiatives stoke the fires of expressive individualism?

Far too often, student success is defined from the institution-down, that is, with *only* institutional goals in mind. This means that we evaluate the effectiveness of colleges based on of the type of students they can *attract* and retain, not the type of students they can *produce*.<sup>7</sup> Therefore,

student “success” is implicitly linked to the ability of an institution to collect students with the best high school GPA or rankings, standardized test scores, and—more recently—various forms of diversity (ethnic, gender, SES, etc...). These are important numbers, but, over time, this emphasis can subtly (or not so subtly) suggest that college is merely a place to perform—not a place to learn or grow.<sup>8</sup>

In response, we find ourselves rather drawn to the definition of student success implied by Hugh of St. Victor’s view that the purpose of higher education was “to restore within us the divine likeness” that was marred by the fall. The benefit of this definition is that rather than defining success “according to the criteria or values that are deemed profitable to an everchanging society...”, it is rooted in God, “the Creator of all that is good.”<sup>9</sup> But this, of course, begs questions like, “Is that restoration possible in four to six years, or even this side of heaven?” and “what would it actually look like?”

These practical questions lead us to the theological work of Bishop Robert Barron who believes “resemble[ing] the divine” is the goal of Christian transformation.<sup>10</sup> He defines Christian transformation using the biblical term *metanoia* which he translates as “go[ing] beyond the mind that you have...to change [your] way of knowing, [your] way of seeing.”<sup>11</sup> Transformation in this sense is not mere cognitive understanding. Instead, “it has everything to do with [a] radical change of life and vision, with the simple (and dreadfully complex) process of allowing oneself to swim in the divine sea, to find the true self by letting go of the old [self-elevating] center.”<sup>12</sup>

A transformation that leads to seeing rightly, according to Bishop Barron, involves seeing the world through the lens of *the magna anima* (big soul with a greater vision of the world) rather than the *pusilla anima* (small soul with a smaller vision of the world). The *pusilla anima* is the “terrified and self-regarding small soul”, defined by a self-elevating ego that grasps for control because it sees God (knowingly or not) as a rival or “competing supreme being.”<sup>13</sup> This competition is not merely between the ego and God, but between all others. “When the ego has made itself the center of its universe, then all other things and people are potential or actual rivals, and they must be kept at bay.”<sup>14</sup> While the *pusilla anima* results in a smaller vision of the world as it tries to control it, the more favorable *magna anima* does the opposite. It is “...the well-ordered soul, the psyche that has centered itself exclusively on Christ and whose energies and powers have found their harmonious place around that center.”<sup>15</sup> Barron continues, “...when we surrender in trust to the bearing power of God, our souls become great, roomy, expansive...we can let go of fear and begin to live in radical trust.”<sup>16</sup>

Bishop Barron was describing Christian transformation for all of life, and not merely for education, but we believe a Christian view of student success cannot be separated from the new way of seeing he describes. Indeed, the two souls Barron (1998) describes lead to two different approaches to education. Educational efforts aimed at cultivating the autonomous and ego-driven *pusilla anima*, aim to make the world smaller—reducing possible threats. Knowledge is acquired safely and as a form of gaining control over the world. Cultivating the *magna anima* does the opposite. Because of the security one finds in focusing on Christ, education can be used to expand the person’s view of God and his created order without fear.

Although few administrators would claim the *pusilla anima* as the goal of their student success efforts, it has become the *de facto* approach of student success scholarship and practice. Contemporary student success efforts are often tied to the cultivation of “self-authorship” (Baxter Magolda, 2001, 2004) and “expressive individualism” (C. Taylor, 1989; Trueman, 2020) that provides avenues for students to “give expression to [their] own feelings and desires” (Trueman, 2020, p. 46). It is not that autonomy and individual expression are inherently wrong, but when they are the goal (even at Christian institutions), education becomes the egocentric consumeristic project described by the Smith (2009) quotation I shared above.

Unfortunately, those working at Christian colleges have been quick to implement these approaches without reflecting on the assumed ends and outcomes of pluralistic researchers. Their resources can certainly be valuable, but they are incomplete. So how can we define true student success? We need to help our students find a new way of seeing that provides individual expression in the context of their true, image-bearing, self. An image we bear collectively and in community. Further, we need to challenge ourselves to serve students in ways that bear this image.

With all this in mind, we define student success as something distinct from the life-long project of sanctification, and yet also part of it. We believe that the college experience ought—ultimately—to help further the restoration of the divine likeness in students by helping them to “go beyond the mind that they have” to see rightly through the cultivation of the *magna anima*. The more they see rightly, the more students will be equipped to order and enrich their “loves in the context of [their] most important relationships and human practices.”<sup>17</sup> This ordering of loves and relationships is similar to what Wolterstorff describes as living in *shalom*—right relationship with God, others, and nature.<sup>18</sup> We recognize that this transformation, this ordering of loves is a lifelong project, and we, therefore, submit that a significant goal of our work is to help students define these as the ends towards which their lives are aimed.

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<sup>1</sup> We are thankful for the input of Dr. Wesley Null of Baylor University on an early draft of our larger document.

<sup>2</sup> Hugh of St. Victor, *The Didascalicon of Hugh of St. Victor: A Medieval Guide to the Arts*, trans. Jerome Taylor, Reprint, Records of Western Civilization (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, c. 1130/1991), 61.

<sup>3</sup> Clark Kerr, *The Uses of the University*, 5th ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001); John R. Thelin, *A History of American Higher Education*, 2nd ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> James Engell and Anthony Dangerfield, *Saving Higher Education in the Age of Money* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2005).

<sup>5</sup> For examples of critiques of the utilitarian approach see, for example, John Henry Newman and Martin J. Svaglic, *The Idea of a University*, Notre Dame Series in the Great Books (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982); Neil Postman, *The End of Education: Redefining the Value of School*, 1st ed. (New York: Knopf, 1995); Robert Maynard Hutchins, *The Higher Learning in America*, Foundations of Higher Education (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 1995).

<sup>6</sup> James K. A. Smith, *The Devil Reads Derrida: And Other Essays on the University, the Church, Politics, and the Arts* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2009), 40.

<sup>7</sup> Robert B. Barr and John Tagg, “From Teaching to Learning: A New Paradigm For Undergraduate Education,” *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning* 27, no. 6 (1995): 12–26, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00091383.1995.10544672>.

<sup>8</sup> Carl R. Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2020).

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<sup>9</sup> Dempsey Rosales-Acosta, “Reflections-Contribution of Fr. Dempsey Rosales Acosta S.S.L., S.T.D. Regarding the ‘White Paper’ Theology of Students’ Success in the Context of Catholic Education” (Unpublished manuscript, March 25, 2021), 3.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Barron, *And Now I See: A Theology of Transformation* (New York: Crossroad Pub, 1998), 186.

<sup>11</sup> Barron, 5.

<sup>12</sup> Barron, 9.

<sup>13</sup> Barron, 6, 246.

<sup>14</sup> Barron, 224.

<sup>15</sup> Barron, 211.

<sup>16</sup> Barron, 6.

<sup>17</sup> Todd C. Ream and Perry L. Glanzer, *The Idea of a Christian College : A Reexamination for Today’s University* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2013), 3.

<sup>18</sup> Nicholas Wolterstorff, Clarence W. Joldersma, and Gloria Goris Stronks, *Educating for Shalom : Essays on Christian Higher Education* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2004).