

June 7, 2021

Toward a Practical Theology of Student Success:

A White Paper

Theodore F. Cockle, Sinda K. Vanderpool, David Q. Hao,
and The Coalition for Christian Student Success¹

Baylor University & University of St. Thomas — Houston

¹ Direct correspondence to Theodore F. Cockle, Educational Leadership, Baylor University,
Ted_Cockle1@baylor.edu

If you were hunting for buried treasure, what would you need? You would need the right tools like a good map, a pickaxe or shovel, and a knowledge of treasure such that you would know when you had found what you were looking for. Without any of these tools you would be unlikely to find any treasure at all. Without a map, how would you know where to dig? Without a shovel, how would you get at what you had found? Without a knowledge of what you were looking for, you might mistake granite for gold. Without these tools you could exert a great deal of effort and yet consistently achieve poor results. What if we told you contemporary definitions of student success have left us to search for treasure with a poor map, the wrong kind of shovel, and incomplete ways of identifying what we have found? In short, what if we told you, we lack an imagination for real success?

Some of you may be quick to agree with this diagnosis. Others may be a bit more skeptical and require a further proof for such a claim. In this white paper, we use a theological map to help us explore the terrain of contemporary student success scholarship and practice in an effort to re-imagine our collective hunt for treasure. We do so because we believe that contemporary student success efforts falter along the same lines as our imagined treasure hunter. This is true even for student success administrators working at Christian colleges who—despite personal convictions—are still essentially relying on maps, tools, and definitions from pluralistic sources rather than seeking out distinctively Christian approaches. It is not that pluralistic student success literature yields no favorable outcomes—it certainly does, but these resources are incomplete and, as a result, use language that has subtly altered our view of students. Because we do not see students rightly (faulty map), we have used the wrong tools to discover only scraps of treasure. Our uncritical implementation of practices from pluralistic sources has made us like a treasure hunter who digs for hours and becomes elated to have found a few gold coins that had

fallen out of a bulging chest as it was carried off to be buried a few feet away. These “coins” are valuable, but incomplete. We have been satisfied by too little. So how can we find the full bounty? What tools do we need to uncover it? How will we know what we are seeking after? In addition to providing a better map and better tools, practical theological thinking can help redefine the goal of our search and thereby ensure we find that for which we were truly looking—the full bounty of student success.

In this paper, we want to invite you to reflect on what our field deems to be important so that we can collectively consider if the current definitions and practices of student success are actually helping us find the best treasure. We will use theological thinking to help equip Christians working in student success to critically engage extant literature before laying the groundwork for a “practical theology of student success.”

In part I, we will review the current scholarly landscape, including the “maps” that guide us and the “tools” of discovery, to show where they fall short. In part II we will lay the groundwork for a practical theology of student success. Finally, in the appendices we offer additional resources for us to consider as a community of scholar-practitioners including a program assessment toolkit and an annotated bibliography of research that is congruent with Christian definitions of student success.

The Current Landscape

Higher education has taken a number of forms throughout American history, each with its own way of defining student success—successful students were good humanists, good citizens, or good leaders (Kerr, 2001; Thelin, 2017). Today’s definitions of student success have become increasingly transactional. Success is linked to quantitative outcomes and the practical utility of a degree (Engell & Dangerfield, 2005). Students gauge their “success” by their answers to

pragmatic questions: “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” that can only be attained after earning the credential college provides (Brown, 2001).

Although critiquing a utilitarian view of education is nothing new (c.f. Hutchins, 1995; Newman & Svaglic, 1982; Postman, 1995), today’s forms of utilitarian thinking are marked by more modern impulses. 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” (J. K. A. Smith, 2009, p. 40). This emphasis on the self also transforms how students see our institutions. Rather than places of formation, “[institutions] become platforms for performance, where individuals are allowed to be their authentic selves precisely because they are able to give expression to who they are ‘inside’” (Trueman, 2020, p. 49). The call to “know thyself” is no longer about conforming to a divinely defined vision of the good life, but instead a call to cultivate the “expressive individual” who’s sense of meaning is bound up with his/her ability to express individual feelings and desires (C. Taylor, 2007; Trueman, 2020).

We suspect many reading this are, at this point, nodding their heads in agreement with the shortcomings of students’ 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 student success professionals 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? How does the language we use define the reality of our interaction with students?

Measuring Success

The best way to begin answering these questions is to look at the language we use as we measure success. After all, these measurements are the metrics for which individual staff and administrators are responsible and the grounds for the interventions we decide to implement. As a result, these are the numbers that determine if a particular staff member or initiative is effective or not. Thus, regardless of the various qualitative or humanistic ideals an institution espouses, the metrics for which you are responsible end up revealing the true assumptions about student success. They establish the language we use when we make decisions, and this “language matters because it shapes the collective imagination of an institution...” (Davis, 2020, p. 345).

In our treasure hunting terms, these “tools” reveal the treasure for which we are searching and the “maps” we used to get there. In this next section, we will explore some of the major metrics used to define success in current student success literature. The metrics fall within one of three categories: student inputs, in-college student metrics, and post-college student metrics.

Student Input Metrics

We borrowed the language of “student inputs” from Barr and Tagg’s (1995) critique of what they call the “instruction paradigm.” In this paradigm they suggest “we judge our colleges by comparing them to one another...[thus,] the criteria for quality are defined in terms of inputs and process measures” (p. 16). Their critique is that colleges are assessed on the basis of the type students they can *attract*, and not by how much learning or transformation takes place. This emphasis on inputs implicitly links a students’ “success” 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...). The more selective the institution (based on these metrics) the more “successful” its students. The lower the admissions

rate, the better and more successful students will become once they attend. Few today would actually describe student success in these terms, but institutions are likely to imply it when they tout admissions statistics on their website. Another example comes from the U.S. News and World Report rankings, 17.5% of which are based on input factors (accepted Pell students, selectivity and size of incoming class; Morse & Brooks, 2020). In fact, only 40% of rankings are determined by student outcomes (retention, graduation, and debt payoff)—and even those numbers are limited for reasons we will discuss in the coming paragraphs. Rather than evaluating success by measuring actual student learning, transformation, or growth, these input metrics imply that the prestige of the institution is what leads to student success.

In-College Student Metrics

Most of the self-proclaimed student success literature assesses in-college student metrics like retention and graduation. Early student success metrics deemed students to be “successful” if they graduated rather than left college (Tinto, 1987, 1993). However, as access to higher education continued to expand in the early 2000s (Habley et al., 2012; Thelin, 2011), scholars realized the errors of such a simple approach to student success (e.g. Hurtado & Carter, 1997). These critiques led to the expansion of scholarship proposing and assessing various interventions intended to enhance student engagement as well as student graduation rates (e.g. Kuh et al., 2010; Kuh & Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2008). The inclusion of “engagement” as an outcome drew upon the legacy of student involvement literature (e.g. Astin, 1984, 1999) coming out of the field of student affairs. But even this expanded definition has its limits, and others have continued to expand definitions of success by exploring what leads to student belonging (e.g. Museus et al., 2017; Strayhorn, 2012) or student “thriving” (Schreiner et al., 2012).

What is interesting about these in-college metrics is that they are all from an institutional perspective. They prescribe student success from the institution-down (Cockle, 2019), that is with primarily institutional goals in mind. They seek student engagement, belonging, or thriving, not because student wellness is good in its own right but because they lead to more favorable outcomes. To be fair, institutions need students to retain to meet tuition goals and to ensure students can continue to benefit from their mission. But this begs the question, what effect does an institution-down approach to student success mean for how we view students? Moreover, of what benefit is a sense of belonging to a college community after a student graduates? Indeed, this is where the language of these in-college “outcomes” often falls short. By focusing on in-college metrics, student success measures and interventions only account for students in the short-term with little to no assessment of the impact down the road. Will these students be involved, thrive, or find belonging once they graduate? These metrics cannot tell us. They are helpful, but incomplete.

Post-College Student Metrics

The final category of assessment is related to post-college student metrics. These are the metrics that colleges and universities have begun to tout on their websites such as job-placement and debt payoff rates. Even college rankings now include such measures in their calculations (Morse & Brooks, 2020). These metrics determine if a student is successful based on the types of jobs they can achieve after college, and whether or not such jobs can adequately help them pay-off their debts. Although these measures consider the lives of students beyond graduation, they continue to emphasize the view that higher education is merely a transaction. When we describe or imply success with economic language we reinforce the belief that higher education is no more than an exchange of tuition for increased earning potential.

Student success is surely not less than career and economic gains, but we hope it would be more than that. A group of sociologists studying emerging adults said it well, “the most important payoffs of college education do not concern career promotions and higher salaries” (C. Smith et al., 2011, p. 101). Rather than an instrumental view of education, we believe it is also about establishing meaningful relationships (Sriram et al., 2020), developing the “whole person” (American Council on Education, 1937), discovering a sense of vocation (e.g. Clydesdale, 2016; Wadell, Pinches, 2021) or purpose (e.g. Glanzer, Hill, et al., 2017), and the cultivation of an educated citizenry (Bok, 2006). These are all outcomes that are being measured in higher education scholarship, but far too often these outcomes are neglected in student success conversations. Once again, student successes are defined on grounds that justify the value of the institution, rather than on the grounds of holistic student flourishing.

Before we even begin to explore student success theologically, take a moment to reflect on the metrics, the practices, and the language your office and institution use. What does your institution espouse success to be in mission statements and learning outcomes and what does it actually require you to measure? What do you actually find yourself talking about? If your metrics and language are similar to ours, we are “on the line” for some standard measures: retention, graduation, job placement, and debt payoff. If our definitions of success and motivations for particular interventions are evaluated on the basis of what we measure, and these are our measures, then we within Christian higher education do not look all that unique from our pluralistic peers. We in Christian higher education need to excavate, recover, re-imagine, or create better ways of measuring and talking about what makes students successful.

Questioning the Tools, Questioning the Maps

The problem with our current conceptualization of student success is not necessarily the tools we are using to measure it—limited though they may be. The true issue is that we are using the wrong maps because we have misidentified the goal of student success. Because we lack a theology of student success we must rely on maps and tools that were created with a very different view of the student in mind. Thus, it is not that the maps or tools are inherently wrong, but that they are leading us to places we, as Christians, would not or should not define as our goal.

For example, a significant number of student success interventions are based on the results described in *Student Success in College* (Kuh et al., 2010) and prescribed by high-impact practices (Kuh & Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2008). Although these practices are no doubt helpful (and likely have many benefits), the fact remains that they were based on a rather limited definition of success—“higher-than-predicted graduation rates and better-than-predicted student engagement” (Kuh et al., 2010, p. xii). Success is surely not less than these things, but we posit here that it must certainly be more.

If this all sounds a bit circular, it is because it is. A limited definition of success (treasure/goal) has led us view students in incomplete ways (maps), which has led us to use incomplete measures (tools). As a result of our increased reliance upon these tools, we perpetuate incomplete views of the student and limited definitions of success. Rather than merely trying to find Christian treasures with incomplete (and incongruent) maps, we need to create new maps of the human person that are more firmly rooted in theological thinking. These, in turn, will help us re-center definitions of student success that fit within God’s story of redemptive history. With more expansive definitions of student success, we can see students as God sees them and

prioritize measures that better reflect such views. In short, thinking theologically about student success provides us with a good definition of what we are searching for, a better understanding of where to look, and better tools for uncovering what we find.

Thinking Theologically: Resources for Christian Student Success

What does it mean to think “theologically” about student success? First, we must distinguish between two general types of theology. The first relates to the academic field of theology. This form of theology uses a particular and rigorous methodology to study and understand God through his various forms of revelation. This is certainly one *form* of theology, and an important one at that, but our efforts here use a second form commonly described as practical theology. This second form is removed from the “science” of theology and instead relies on the direction of the Spirit to apply the truths about God and his creation to everyday life. In this latter form of theology, every aspect of life becomes an opportunity to encounter God. Seen through this lens, the educational experience of our students becomes a journey of transformation in which they encounter truth, beauty, and goodness such that they discover the unity of knowledge, which is only bound up in the “ultimate and absolute Truth who is God” (Rosales-Acosta, 2021, pp. 1–2).

Practical theological thinking is particularly helpful for our purposes in student success because it allows for all of life to be an opportunity to encounter God and in turn define the ultimate goods of humanity. This also means that we do not encounter God’s truths solely as individuals but as communities and as a collective humanity, and thus, holistic student success requires us to be dependent upon one another. A theologically informed definition of success will therefore require interdisciplinary thinking in order to capture the whole of what we hope our students to become. No single field or metric can account for the whole.

We must ask ourselves what do the tools we currently use to assess “success” imply about what it means to be human (our maps) and the goals/treasure we are seeking? What do these maps and definitions imply about the nature of God? And beyond this reflection of current practice, how can we envision future practice that uses tools and maps derived from God’s definitions of humanity and human flourishing.

Integrating Theology and Student Success

In order to answer these questions about current and future practice, we need to think at an abstract level about how we go about integrating our theological thinking with our practice. A recent study of Christians working in student affairs (Glanzer et al., 2020) found three approaches to integrating faith and practice. Their three approaches are instructive for our purposes here. Much of our current practice resides in the first two approaches, which reflect an after-the-fact forced integration, but the third approach demonstrates a vision towards which we believe our field should be moving.

Christ Assumed

The first approach assumes that a professionals’ practice will be Christian because they themselves are Christian. It is true that the Spirit will transform our desires as we pursue God, but a statement like this wrongly suggests that the process of integrating theology with practice does not require intentional work. When theology is not an intentional focus, more readily accessible maps of human nature and definitions of success will fill the void.

Christ Added

The student affairs leaders who employed the Christ Added approach saw the Christian identity as an additional, special facet of a professional identity—a facet that was added to an existing construct of what it meant to be a Christian student affairs professional. In the student

success world this would be equivalent to utilizing existing metrics and merely adding a “spirituality” category to success measures. The Christ Added approach can yield excellent results (e.g. prayer with students, bible studies, chapel, etc...), but because it is merely an addition, it fails to question the basic assumptions embedded within the definitions of humanity human we borrow from pluralistic colleges and universities. A third approach is needed.

Christ Animating

The third category is a Christ Animating approach (Davis, 2017; Glanzer et al., 2020; Glanzer & Alleman, 2019). When something is animated, it is brought to life (think of the vision of the valley of dry bones in Ezekiel 37, Christ’s resurrection, or our own necessary experience of being “born again”). Thus, Christ animating student success involves practice that is brought to life—flesh, bones, and all the rest—on the basis of Christ and the story of his “restoring, reconciling grace for all of creation” (J. K. A. Smith, 2013, p. 157). When Christ enlivens something, he does so completely and comprehensively.

The vision of a Christ Animated approach is easy to articulate in the abstract, but at this point raises more questions than answers. So, what is it?

Toward a Practical Theology of Student Success

A Christ Animated approach to student success involves a radical commitment to truths about the nature of God and humanity—as outlined in scripture—that matter and that have implications for how we carry out our work. The full extent of how Christ might animate success is a conversation this paper is intended to initiate and it will require collective reflection about the nature of the human person and our relationship with our Creator. These more fundamental questions are required before we can rightly implement a practical theology of student success. Our reflection on these fundamental questions has led us consider three core elements: a well-

ordered soul (treasure), a view of the whole person that helps us situate our efforts (map), and tools to cultivate and reveal it in students. What follows is a preliminary attempt at defining these three elements. Our thoughts are by no means exhaustive nor are they above critique. That said, we offer them in the hopes of sparking a conversation amongst our profession about what exactly we might mean when we espouse a “practical theology of student success.”

Defining our Treasure

As we asked in the introduction, without a definition of your treasure, how will you know it when you have found it? And how will you avoid counterfeits? We begin the process of defining student success in more abstract terms (and we hope the details will be filled in through subsequent conversations in the field). That is, we hope to adjust the notional direction of success at an ideological level such that subsequent detailed descriptions can follow.

We find ourselves rather drawn to the definition of student success implied by Hugh of St. Victor (c. 1130/1991, p. 61) who believed the goal 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 individual or to society it is, instead, rooted in God, “the Creator of all that is good” (Rosales-Acosta, 2021, p. 3). Additionally, St. Victor’s view of the purpose of higher education is broad enough to include both the pursuit of truth, which is typically codified in the “research” focus of faculty, as well as the dissemination of such knowledge through teaching and campus life. These two elements, in tandem, work to further the process of student transformation toward the divine likeness, to make them better resemble God’s nature. Thus, student success would be defined as a restored divine likeness. But this, of course, raises larger questions, “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 (1998) who—similar to St. Victor—believes “resemble[ing] the divine” (p. 186) is the goal of Christian transformation. He defines Christian transformation as “go[ing] beyond the mind that you have...to change [your] way of knowing, [your] way of seeing” (p. 5). Transformation in this sense is not mere cognitive understanding. Instead, “it has everything to do with 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” (Barron, 1998, p. 9).

A transformation that leads to seeing rightly, according to Bishop Barron (1998), requires a shift of the soul that changes the lens through which one sees the world. Rather than a limiting lens that shrinks and tries to contain the world, Barron suggests we should utilize an expansive, God-centered lens. The limiting lens, he suggests, is a defensive strategy of the “terrified and self-regarding small soul” (p. 6) wherein a self-elevating-ego grasps for control because it sees God (knowingly or not) as a rival or “competing supreme being” (p. 246). This competition is not merely with God, but with 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” (p. 224). Whereas the limiting lens results in a smaller vision of the world in an effort to control it, the more favorable expansive lens does the opposite. The expansive lens is the way of seeing associated with “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” (p. 211). Barron continues, “when we surrender in trust to the bearing power of God...we can let go of fear and begin to live in radical trust” (p. 6). Therefore, although an expansive lens makes a

person smaller in comparison to the world, they are nonetheless more secure because their well-ordered soul is secure in God's authority over the world.

Although Bishop Barron describes Christian transformation for all of life, and not merely for education, we believe a Christian view of student success cannot be separated from this way of seeing. Indeed, Higher education is not the church, and yet, rightly understood, it should serve as the *mind* of the church (Glanzer, Alleman, et al., 2017; Ream & Glanzer, 2013). That is, by joining God in the "creation and redemption of learners and learning" (Ream & Glanzer, 2013, p. 54), colleges and universities can support the Church's transformative efforts by supplying knowledge about God and God's created order (including humanity).

Indeed, the two selves Barron (1998) describes lead to two different approaches to education which correspond to the two lenses. Educational efforts that cultivate the autonomous and ego-driven self, aim to make the world smaller, limiting possible threats. Knowledge is acquired safely and as a form of gaining control over the world. Cultivating the well-ordered self does the opposite. Because of the security one finds in focusing on Christ, education can be used to expand the one's view of God and his created order without fear.

Although few administrators would claim the ego-driven self (and corresponding limiting lens) as their treasure, it has become the *de facto* approach of the pluralistic university. Contemporary student success efforts use the language of "self-authorship" (Baxter Magolda, 2001, 2004) and are tied to the "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 an egocentric consumeristic project "as if all these things were there for me, and for me to do with them as I please" (Smith,

2009, p. 40). We need to help our students find a new way of seeing that provides individual expression in the context of their true, well-ordered self, which bears the image of God both individually and in community. Further, we need to challenge ourselves to serve and talk about students in ways that also bear this image.

With all this in mind, we define student success as something distinct from sanctification, and yet also part of it. We believe that the college experience ought—ultimately—to help further the restoration the divine likeness in students by helping them to “go beyond the mind that they have,” to see the world expansively through the cultivation of the well-ordered self. The more they see rightly, the better equipped they will be to order and enrich their “loves in the context of [their] most important relationships and human practices” (Ream & Glanzer, 2013, p. 3). This ordering of loves and relationships is like what Wolterstorff (2004) describes as living in *shalom*—right relationship with God, others, and nature. Recognizing that this transformation, this ordering of loves, is a lifelong project, we submit that a significant goal of our work is to help students define these as the ends towards which their lives are aimed. Thus, student success must be bound to a particular understanding of human success—of human flourishing.

The Map: Seeing Students as Whole Persons

Part of the sight the expansive lens provides is a re-envisioning of what it means to be a person. Our current student success metrics and measures see students as a collection of various identity pieces. We categorize students by race/ethnicity, social class, gender, academic ability, class rank and create maps—based on how these various identities intersect—in order to assess a student’s ability to retain. As we have been saying, these measures and categorizations are not wrong, but they have become wrongly situated. Through our consistent parsing of students, we have habituated in our minds an understanding that whole students are the sum of some

collection of these pieces. The reality, however, is that they are whole image-bearing humans *before* they were identified by any of these particularities. “The whole person precedes—and thereby contextualizes—the parts. Yet much of student affairs theory and practice works under the assumption that the parts combine to determine the whole.” (Glanzer et al., 2020, p. 84). This distinction may seem subtle to the point of insignificance but consider how it plays out in student success.

Since Tinto’s initial models, scholars have tried to explain reasons why college students leave (e.g. Braxton et al., 2014) or how we can help them stay (e.g. Habley et al., 2012), and they do so largely on the basis of some combination of demographic variables. These models can be helpful as we map out our retention goals, but we must be careful not to associate student value with the demographics they possess—no matter how much our models tell us they are favorable/unfavorable. Because students are image bearers first, they have an inherent dignity regardless of their capacity for retention or departure. Again, this shift is subtle, but it reminds us that students do not retain or achieve on the basis of some demographic statistic, but the very human story for which that statistic is but a mere proxy. The solution is not to get more favorable students (input measures), but to imagine and learn new ways of helping students who tend to struggle, even if they are only under our mission for a short time. Seeing students as whole persons first helps expand our treasure maps by reminding us that graduating from college is not the only way of achieving or ensuring the good life. As much as it might hurt our numbers, more college is not always the right answer for every student. It is inefficient, but then again, there were times the Lord commanded inefficiency for the sake of the least of these ([Lev 19:9](#)). Additionally, a student may retain and matriculate all the way through to graduation (in four years no less!) and yet—lacking the holistic transformation that our Christian mission

promised—fail to truly launch into adulthood. The more we can see students in their entirety, the more we can help students.

The Tools:

Third and finally, we need tools that reflect a right understanding of our treasure and our map. We need tools that help us cultivate, assess, and talk about the extent to which our students have begun to see rightly. We need tools that help assess whether or not our students have encountered and been transformed by the good, the true, and the beautiful. For it is only by engaging with such things that students can begin to form the “noble capacities” (Larsen, 2018, p. 104) that enable the likeness of God to be restored within students. These capacities are those skills and virtues which accord with the right worship of God and the loving service of others. See Appendix B for a brief preliminary list of several possible “noble capacities” and scholars who have studied them in ways that align with the vision of success we have outlined here thus far. It is important to note that the shift we outline above does not require us to forego all our existing programs, models, or assessments. It is our hope, instead, that we have provided a theological lens through which to see our current programs, models, and assessments. This new sight helps us to remember the image-bearing person which these tools are meant to help *and* ideally uncovers what should matter alongside our rightly ordered institutional priorities.

Conclusion

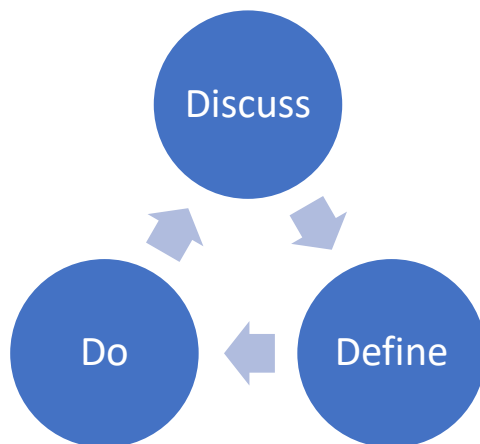
In this paper we have only begun to answer the question “what does a successful student look like?” We have done so by using a practical theology to help expand our understanding of student success beyond a limited collection of student inputs or outcomes. Although we have largely focused on how to see students rightly, we hope you have also seen the question behind our question—“what does a good student success administrator look like?” Successful

administrators use the right tools by knowing and valuing them, but also by seeking to create a shared interpretation of the nature of reality, which is itself, the basis for forming a culture (Schein, 2004). Our prayer is that Christian administrators of student success would begin actively creating cultures known for their engagement with—and application of—theological thought and language.

Appendix A

Program Assessment Toolkit

The greatest danger facing a paper like this is that an administrator will read it, nodding affirmatively along the way, then go about their work the same as they did the day before. To combat this temptation, we have created a program assessment toolkit to help you begin the process of discussing, defining, and implementing a theology of student success. Although this is meant mostly to help you *begin* the process, it is best utilized cyclically, such that once new tools are implemented, you begin the process of discussing and assessing once again.



Discuss – *Assessing Current Practice*

Whether you are the leader of student success initiatives on your campus or a team member, the first step is to discuss your current student success practices. It could be as simple as gathering a few colleagues together over lunch. Here are a few questions to prompt discussion.

- How do we define success?
 - What do you hope to see in your students at graduation?
 - In what ways have we elevated human constructions of flourishing rather than divinely defined ways of flourishing?
- How do we see students?
 - How does our current approach to student success balance institutional priorities with student priorities?
 - What aspects of image-bearing are reflected in our view of students? What is missing? (see appendix B for some categories)
- How do we go about our practice?
 - What do our current programs, models, and measures say about what we value in students?

- What areas of our student success practice could be transformed by theological sight?

Define – *Casting Vision for Future Practice*

The next step is beginning to think theologically to cast a vision for future practice. Spend time together discussing and articulating the following:

- How would you redefine student success? What would your theology of student success include?
- What does it mean for students to bear God’s image?
- What measures need to be added and what measures need to be dropped from how we assess student success?

Do – *Implementing New Practices*

The final step is determining some possible next steps. As you decide on first steps and the speed at which you move, you will need to be sensitive to your unique institutional context. If you have full buy-in from your executive team you will have a lot of freedom to adjust your success models. If you do not have full buy-in, consider beginning with a single policy change, or by adding a single metric to your model of success. Do not underestimate the power of these “small wins” (Weick, 1984). Weick defines small wins as “concrete, complete, implemented outcome[s] of moderate importance” (p. 43). The point of focusing on small wins is that it attracts less attention while simultaneously building momentum for future proposed changes. With this in mind, here are a few questions to consider as you implement new practices:

- What campus stakeholders will be affected by these changes? What conversations do you need to have before you make the shift?
- With which campus stakeholders could you partner as you go about implementing new practices?
- What are a few “small wins” you could achieve as you begin integrating theological thinking into your definition of student success?

Appendix B

Annotated Bibliography

We broadly defined student success as the cultivation of “noble capacities” (Larsen, 2018, p. 104) that further enable the likeness of God to be restored within students. These capacities are those skills and virtues which accord with the right worship of God and the loving service of others. Accordingly, institutions will need to determine what exactly this could look like for their unique contexts. To aid you in this process, we have compiled a list of possible “noble capacities” alongside scholars who have studied them in ways that align with the vision of success we have outlined here thus far (though not necessarily “Christianly”). The capacities are organized in categories that reflect the various ways students might reflect God’s nature.

Made for Purpose

- Developing beyond the Self purposes (Damon et al., 2003)
 - Researchers define what it means to have a purpose. They note the particular benefit of purposes that go beyond one’s own achievements and instead contribute to organizations or communities that are bigger than any individual.
- Finding Purpose in College (Glanzer, Hill, et al., 2017)
 - A national study of students’ understanding of meaning and purpose as well as what leads to it.
- Purposeful graduates (Clydesdale, 2016)
 - An important book that reports on the various aspects of the college experience that help students find purpose and vocation.
- Living Vocationally (Wadell & Pinches, 2021)
 - An excellent exploration and application of the Christian roots of “vocation” that reframes the importance of living vocationally today. The authors discuss the importance of discerning our callings as well as a list of virtues needed to live the called life.

Made for Relationship and Living in Community

- Deeper Life Interaction (Sriram et al., 2020; Sriram & McLevain, 2016a)
 - A host of research has linked faculty student interaction to student success (traditionally defined). Sriram and colleagues contend that it is important to distinguish between different types of interaction. Sriram et al. suggest that students who talk to adults on campus about meaning and purpose (deeper life interaction) will have the most favorable outcomes.

- The future of residence life in Christian Higher Education (Sriram & McLevain, 2016b)
 - Sriram and McLevain argue that residence life can help reclaim a holistic approach to education.
- Race on campus (Park, 2018)
 - Park uses quantitative research to debunk several myths about race on college campuses.
- Educating citizens (Colby et al., 2003)
 - Colby and colleagues discuss different models for cultivating a sense of citizenship within students.
- Socially Responsible Leadership (Dugan & Komives, 2010; Johnson & Mincer, 2017; Komives & Wagner, 2017)
 - These resources all center around the *Social Change Model*, which describes organizational change on the interaction between individual, group, and societal values. The leadership scale assesses various qualities of leadership the authors believe facilitate change in light of their model.
- Educating for shalom (Wolterstorff et al., 2004)
 - This book is a collection of essays by Nicholas Wolterstorff exploring the purpose and function of Christian higher education. Wolterstorff contends that the purpose of Christian higher ed is to cultivate shalom which he describes as a right relationship between humans and God, humans and humans, and humans and nature.

Made to Love Virtue

These scholars have found new ways of studying and understanding virtues.

- Identity excellence (Glanzer, 2021)
 - Glanzer suggests every person is responsible for multiple identities (e.g. student, friend, son/daughter...), but one does not simply become an excellent in one of those identities merely by possessing it. He argues, “since we have multiple identities, we must realize that learning to be excellent in each of them often entails undertaking rigorous study and practice.”
- Character and Moral self-identity (D. Lapsley & Hardy, 2017; D. K. Lapsley, 2008)

- Recent psychological research has expanded upon—and where necessary critiqued—Kohlberg’s model for moral development. Rather than merely progressing through stages of complexity, Lapsley’s research suggests that morality is developed as an identity. That is, students may increase in their cognitive complexity, but their moral imagination will only inform their decisions in as much as they have integrated such an imagination into their sense of self. This approach provides a new way of measuring the extent of students moral development that has been linked to a host of favorable outcomes (include student mental health).
- Patience (Schnitker, 2012; Schnitker & Emmons, 2007); Self-Control (Schnitker et al., 2017; Sriram et al., 2018)
 - Schnitker and colleagues have pioneered new ways of measuring classic virtues.

Made to Succeed

- Thriving on Campus (Schreiner et al., 2012, 2020)
 - This book (and it’s recently published second edition) represent a strengths-based approach to student success and retention efforts. The authors present several studies about what leads students to thrive academically, interpersonally, and intrapersonally in college contexts.

Additional Resources on the Mission of Christian Higher Education

- *Restoring the Soul of the University: Unifying Christian Higher Education in a Fragmented Age* (Glanzer, Alleman, et al., 2017)
 - This is a must-read text for any Christian working in higher education today. The book traces the history of theological thinking in higher education in a way that describes how we’ve arrived at the fragmented nature of our present reality. In the final third of the book, the authors offer illuminating and practical recommendations for every area of the university.
- *The Idea of a Christian College* (Holmes, 1987) and *The Idea of a Christian College: A Reexamination for Today’s University* (Ream & Glanzer, 2013)
 - Both Holmes’s original and Ream & Glanzer’s rearticulation of the idea of a Christian college apply robust theological thinking to the life and practices of Christian colleges and universities.
- *Why College Matters to God* (Ostrander, 2012)

- An introduction (aimed at students) to the purposes and goals of a Christian college education. After tracing a brief history of higher education, the book helps students place their experiences within the framework of redemptive history.

References

- American Council on Education. (1937). *The student personnel point of view* (Series 1 No. 3; American Council on Education Studies).
- Astin, A. W. (1984). Student involvement: A developmental theory for higher education. *Journal of College Student Personnel*, 25(4), 297–308.
- Astin, A. W. (1999). Involvement in learning revisited: Lessons we have learned. *Journal of College Student Development*, 40(5).
- Barron, R. (1998). *And now I see: A theology of transformation*. Crossroad Pub.
- Baxter Magolda, M. B. (2001). *Making their own way: Narratives for transforming higher education to promote self-development*. Stylus.
- Baxter Magolda, M. B. (2004). Self-authorship as the common goal of 21st century education. In M. B. Baxter Magolda & P. M. King (Eds.), *Learning partnerships: Theory and models of practice to educate for self-authorship* (1st ed, pp. 1–35). Stylus Pub.
- Bok, D. C. (2006). *Our underachieving colleges: A candid look at how much students learn and why they should be learning more*. Princeton University Press.
- Braxton, J. M., Doyle, W. R., Hartley, H. V., III, Hirschy, A. S., Jones, W. A., & McLendon, M. K. (2014). *Rethinking college student retention* (First edition). Jossey-Bass, A Wiley Imprint.
- Brown, D. K. (2001). The Social Sources of Educational Credentialism: Status Cultures, Labor Markets, and Organizations. *Sociology of Education*, 74, 19.
- Clydesdale, T. T. (2016). *The purposeful graduate: Why colleges must talk to students about vocation*.

- Cockle, T. F. (2019). Morally animated: Toward a first-year seminar from the person up. *Journal of College and Character*, 20(3), 218–233.
- Colby, A., Ehrlich, T., Beaumont, E., & Stephens, J. (2003). *Educating citizens: Preparing America's undergraduates for lives of moral and civic responsibility* (1st ed). Jossey-Bass.
- Damon, W., Menon, J., & Cotton Bronk, K. (2003). The Development of Purpose During Adolescence. *Applied Developmental Science*, 7(3), 119–128.
https://doi.org/10.1207/S1532480XADS0703_2
- Davis, D. H. (2017). Faith animating learning. *International Journal of Christianity & Education*, 21(2), 91–94. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056997117704400>
- Davis, D. (2020). Seeking the Common Good by Educating for Wisdom. *Christian Scholar's Review*, 49(4), 343–353.
- Dugan, J. P., & Komives, S. R. (2010). Influences on College Students' Capacities for Socially Responsible Leadership. *Journal of College Student Development*, 51(5), 525–549.
- Engell, J., & Dangerfield, A. (2005). *Saving higher education in the age of money*. University of Virginia Press.
- Glanzer, P. L. (2021). *Identity in action: Christian excellence in all of life*. ACU Press.
- Glanzer, P. L., & Alleman, N. F. (2019). *The Outrageous idea of Christian teaching*. Oxford University Press.
- Glanzer, P. L., Alleman, N. F., & Ream, T. C. (2017). *Restoring the soul of the university: Unifying Christian higher education in a fragmented age*. InterVarsity Press.
- Glanzer, P. L., Cockle, T. F., Jeong, E. G., & Graber, B. N. (2020). *Christ-enlivened student affairs: A guide to Christian thinking and practice in the field*. ACU Press.

- Glanzer, P. L., Hill, J. P., & Johnson, B. R. (2017). *The quest for purpose: The collegiate search for a meaningful life*. State University of New York Press.
- Habley, W. R., Bloom, J. L., & Robbins, S. B. (2012). *Increasing persistence: Research-based strategies for college student success*. Jossey-Bass.
- Holmes, A. F. (1987). *The idea of a Christian college* (1462855; Rev.). Eerdmans.
- Hugh of St. Victor. (1991). *The didascalicon of Hugh of St. Victor: A medieval guide to the arts* (J. Taylor, Trans.; Reprint). Columbia Univ. Press.
- Hurtado, S., & Carter, D. F. (1997). Effects of College Transition and Perceptions of the Campus Racial Climate on Latino College Students' Sense of Belonging. *Sociology of Education*, 70(4), 324–345.
- Hutchins, R. M. (1995). *The higher learning in America*. Transaction Publishers.
- Johnson, M. R., & Mincer, G. (2017). Fostering Socially Responsible Leadership in College Students: Insights From the Multi-Institutional Study of Leadership. *New Directions for Student Services*, 2017(159), 47–59. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ss.20226>
- Kerr, C. (2001). *The uses of the university* (5th ed.). Harvard University Press.
- Komives, S. R., & Wagner, W. (2017). *Leadership for a better world: Understanding the social change model of leadership development* (19149095; Second edition.). Jossey-Bass.
- Kuh, G. D. & Association of American Colleges and Universities. (2008). *High-impact educational practices: What they are, who has access to them, and why they matter*. Association of American Colleges and Universities.
- Kuh, G. D., Kinzie, J., Schuh, J. H., Whitt, E., J., & Associates. (2010). *Student success in college: Creating conditions that matter* (1st ed.). Jossey-Bass.

- Lapsley, D., & Hardy, S. A. (2017). Identity formation and moral development in emerging adulthood. In L. M. Padilla-Walker & L. J. Nelson (Eds.), *Flourishing in emerging adulthood: Positive development during the third decade of life* (Vol. 1, pp. 14–39). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780190260637.003.0002>
- Lapsley, D. K. (2008). Moral self-identity as the aim of education. In L. P. Nucci & D. Narváez (Eds.), *Handbook of moral and character education* (pp. 30–52). Routledge.
- Larsen, T. (2018). John Henry Newman's The Idea of a University and Christian Colleges in the Twenty-First Century. In T. C. Ream, J. Pattengale, & C. J. Devers (Eds.), *The state of the Evangelical mind: Reflections on the past, prospects for the future* (pp. 101–123). InterVarsity Press.
- Morse, R., & Brooks, E. (2020, September 13). How U.S. News calculated the 2021 best colleges rankings. *U.S. News & World Report*. <https://www.usnews.com/education/best-colleges/articles/how-us-news-calculated-the-rankings>
- Museus, S. D., Yi, V., & Saelua, N. (2017). The Impact of Culturally Engaging Campus Environments on Sense of Belonging. *The Review of Higher Education*, 40(2), 187–215. <https://doi.org/10.1353/rhe.2017.0001>
- Newman, J. H., & Svaglic, M. J. (1982). *The idea of a university*. University of Notre Dame Press.
- Ostrander, R. (2012). *Why college matters to God: An introduction to the Christian college*.
- Park, J. J. (2018). *Race on campus: Debunking myths with data*. Harvard Education Press.
- Postman, N. (1995). *The end of education: Redefining the value of school* (1st ed.). Knopf.
- Ream, T. C., & Glanzer, P. L. (2013). *The idea of a Christian college: A reexamination for today's university*. Cascade Books.

- Rosales-Acosta, D. (2021). *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].
- Schein, E. H. (2004). *Organizational culture and leadership* (3rd ed.). Jossey-Bass.
- Schnitker, S. A. (2012). An examination of patience and well-being. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 7(4), 263–280. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2012.697185>
- Schnitker, S. A., & Emmons, R. A. (2007). Patience as a virtue: Religious and psychological perspectives. In R. L. Piedmont (Ed.), *Research in the Social Scientific Study of Religion, Volume 18* (pp. 177–207). BRILL. <https://doi.org/10.1163/ej.9789004158511.i-301.69>
- Schnitker, S. A., Felke, T. J., Fernandez, N. A., Redmond, N., & Blews, A. E. (2017). Efficacy of self-control and patience interventions in adolescents. *Applied Developmental Science*, 21(3), 165–183. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10888691.2016.1178578>
- Schreiner, L. A., Louis, M. C., & Nelson, D. D. (2012). *Thriving in transitions: A research-based approach to college student success*. University of South Carolina, National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition.
- Schreiner, L. A., Louis, M. C., Nelson, D. D., & National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience & Students in Transition (University of South Carolina) (Eds.). (2020). *Thriving in transitions: A research-based approach to college student success* (2nd edition). National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience & Students in Transition.
- Smith, C., Christoffersen, K. M., Davidson, H. A., & Herzog, P. S. (2011). *Lost in transition: The dark side of emerging adulthood*. Oxford University Press.

- Smith, J. K. A. (2009). Are students “consumers”? In J. K. A. Smith, *The devil reads Derrida: And other essays on the university, the church, politics, and the arts* (pp. 39–45). William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co.
- Smith, J. K. A. (2013). *Imagining the kingdom: How worship works*. Baker Academic.
- Sriram, R., Glanzer, P. L., & Allen, C. C. (2018). What Contributes to Self-Control and Grit?: The Key Factors in College Students. *Journal of College Student Development*, 59(3), 259–273. <https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2018.0026>
- Sriram, R., Haynes, C., Cheatle, J., Marquart, C. P., Murray, J. L., & Weintraub, S. D. (2020). The Development and Validation of an Instrument Measuring Academic, Social, and Deeper Life Interactions. *Journal of College Student Development*, 61(2), 240–245. <https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2020.0020>
- Sriram, R., & McLevain, M. (2016a). Developing an Instrument to Examine Student–Faculty Interaction in Faculty-in-Residence Programs. *Journal of College Student Development*, 57(5), 604–609. <https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2016.0065>
- Sriram, R., & McLevain, M. (2016b). The Future of Residence Life and Student Affairs in Christian Higher Education. *Christian Higher Education*, 15(1–2), 72–83. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15363759.2015.1106354>
- Strayhorn, T. L. (2012). *College students’ sense of belonging: A key to educational success for all students*. Routledge.
- Taylor, C. (1989). *Sources of the self: The making of the modern identity*. Harvard University Press.
- Taylor, C. (2007). *A secular age*. Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

- Theelin, J. R. (2011). *A history of American higher education* (2nd ed.). Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Theelin, J. R. (2017). *American higher education: Issues and institutions*. Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.
- Tinto, V. (1987). *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition*. University of Chicago Press.
- Tinto, V. (1993). *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition* (2nd ed.). University of Chicago Press.
- Trueman, C. R. (2020). *The rise and triumph of the modern self: Cultural amnesia, expressive individualism, and the road to sexual revolution*. Crossway.
- Wadell, P. J., & Pinches, C. R. (2021). *Living vocationally: The journey of the called life*. Cascade Books.
- Weick, K. E. (1984). Small wins: Redefining the scale of social problems. *American Psychologist*, 39(1), 40–49.
- Wolterstorff, N., Joldersma, C. W., & Stronks, G. G. (2004). *Educating for shalom: Essays on Christian higher education*. W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co.