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“What Would Make This a Successful Year for You?” How Students Define Success in College

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Our institutions—like most others in the country—make grand claims about the educational experiences we seek to provide our students. We invoke these claims routinely—in admissions materials, at commencement ceremonies, at trustee meetings, in mission statements—and it is not uncommon for students, faculty, staff and alumni to be able to recount, at least in part, the specific language of these claims. They provide a sort of moral compass that orients us toward the core values of our colleges.

These claims may also be viewed as standards against which we measure our success in educating students. We will have done our job if our graduates lose themselves “in generous enthusiasms,” in “intellectual discovery,” or “make a difference in the world.” No doubt many of our students hope they will indeed graduate with these abilities. But our students are also exposed to numerous other perspectives on the college experience. And no perspective is more prominent, particularly in these tough economic times, than the one that defines college success as landing a good (i.e., high-paying) job or gaining admission to a top-ranked graduate or professional school. From this vantage point, the question, “Will a liberal arts degree be worth it?” means will it pay off financially. With this understandable concern vying for students’ attention, how well do the life aspirations expressed in our colleges’ mission statements shape the way students define their own success?

In this article we look at students’ definitions of success over their four years of college. We find that themes related to *academic achievement*—primarily “getting good grades”—predominate over themes related to *academic engagement*—the loftier aspirations voiced in our mission statements, such as developing a love of learning or a breadth of knowledge. Reflecting on the stories told by our students, we are not surprised by their preoccupation with grades. Nor do we find ourselves dismissing their views of success as less worthy than our colleges’ loftier and noble principles. Instead, we are encouraged to observe many students finding inspiration in our institution’s professed values and becoming engaged learners while at the same time defining success in terms of good grades.

The NECASL Data

We are members of a group of liberal arts colleges in New England (Bates, Bowdoin, Colby, Middlebury, Smith, Trinity and Wellesley) that, in 2005, joined with our regional accreditor (New England Association of Schools and Colleges) to form the New England Consortium on Assessment and Student Learning (NECASL). This collaboration seeks to understand how students make important decisions during

college, assess the extent to which institutional policies and practices foster student learning, and modify those policies and practices accordingly.

Here we analyze interviews with a subsample of 66 students who entered NECASL colleges in 2006 and graduated four years later. The gender and racial composition in this smaller sample mirrors that found for the full sample of NECASL students. Two of the NECASL schools are single sex, which accounts for the large number of women (73%); the racial composition of the sample—65% are students of color or international students—reflects our over-sampling of these two groups.

Each student was interviewed three times in the first year of college and once each semester thereafter. Although these interviews covered many aspects of college life, this article focuses on a question we asked at the beginning of each academic year: “Thinking ahead to the end of the year, what would make this a successful year for you?”

How Do Students Define Success, and How Do These Definitions Change over Time?

Using a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss 1967; Jones, Torres & Arminio 2006) to analyze responses to this question about success, we identified four thematic categories: academic achievement, social and residential, life management, and academic engagement themes (See Table 1.) **Academic achievement** themes included such things as getting good grades or improving one’s grades, achieving college milestones (e.g., declaring a major, planning for off-campus study), and engaging in career-oriented activities. The vast majority of students (over 80% each year) defined success using one or more of these academic achievement themes, the most common of which was achieving good grades.

A second group of responses dealing with **social and residential life** was also quite common: making new friends, maintaining and strengthening friendships or pursuing extracurricular activities. As expected, the desire to make new friends was most pronounced in the first year when social and residential themes peaked in frequency of mention at 71%. Students often talked about wanting to maintain their friendships as graduation approached.

Life management themes included maintaining psychological and physical well-being, work ethic issues (e.g., better time management, developing effective study skills), and balancing academics with one’s social or personal life. Defining success in terms of life management was relatively common (between 44%-82% each year).

Our fourth category of success themes focused on **academic engagement**: expressing a desire to learn, to take interesting classes or explore new subject areas, or to engage in independent research. We were surprised more students did not define success in these terms. Those who did (between 30%-53% each year) mostly

talked about wanting to learn—until the senior year, when students linked their definitions of success to independent research or honors projects

As seen in Figure 1, academic achievement themes (especially getting good grades) were most important to defining success throughout college. Social and residential themes were most common in the first year but continue to be mentioned through the senior year. Life management themes increased through the junior year and then receded in the senior year. And although academic engagement themes increased from first year to senior year, they never became a predominant way to define success in college.

When students are asked to define success in college, why do they talk so much about grades (a measure of *academic achievement*) and so little about *academic engagement* (e.g., a desire to learn)? Before we suggest answers to this question, we briefly examine how *individual* students' definitions of success vary in accordance with these two themes as they move through college. For example, how does a student who focuses on grades in defining success each year compare to one who starts out doing so but then stops somewhere along the way?

Grades, Engagement and Definitions of Success: Three Case Studies

Figure 2 shows how the success themes of grades and academic engagement varied across the four years of college. Because over three-quarters of the students in our sample expressed a grade-related success theme in their first year, the tree diagram begins with this group. Each node in the tree displays how many students mentioned (or failed to mention) a grade-related success theme, as well as how many within each of these groups also mentioned an academic engagement success theme. For example, in the first year, of the 51 students who included some form of “making good grades” in their definition of a successful first year, 13 (25%) also included an academic engagement theme in their definition. By the fourth year, nearly half (23 of 51) continued to use grades to define success, and the majority of this group (14 of 23) never mentioned an academic engagement theme.

Rita is one of the 23 students who *always* mentioned something about grades as a marker of a successful year. She is focused on becoming a physician and in many ways views college as a stepping stone to medical school. A successful first year for Rita means “successful grades”: “[G]rades have always been a big part of defining my success....It's been kind of drilled into me.”

In her second year Rita takes a psychology class that she really enjoys but then “kind of stopped” when she got Bs on two papers instead of As. Her “best” class is biology because she is doing well, although her “favorite” class is organic chemistry. She defines a successful second year as “acing organic chemistry” and “raising her GPA” from last year.” As Rita heads into her junior year she wants to complete her major, “do well grade-wise,” and score highly on her MCATs. As a senior, Rita defines success as “getting an interview at a medical school of choice and graduating from

college knowing that I will be attending medical school.” Rita graduates with a high GPA and gets into a top medical school.

Rita is clearly not “academically adrift” (Arum & Roksa 2010); she is more like a character in a sequel to *Race to Nowhere* (Abeles 2010) for whom the end point of *überachievement* is getting into a good graduate program. She never defines success using the language of engagement, but elsewhere in her interviews talks about behaviors that we’d characterize as academically engaging. Rita develops deep relationships with her professors and cites these as one of the things she misses most after graduation. She also says the most valuable part of her college experience was that it helped her to try new things: “I was a science major, and I took art history just to fulfill a requirement, and I was surprised how much I liked it.” These engaging experiences do not find their way into Rita’s narrative of college success.

Like Rita, Tina begins college focused on achieving good grades as a measure of success, in part because she too wants to get into medical school. In her first two years, she only cites grades as her measure of success. By her junior year, however, even as she continues to worry that she won’t have good enough grades to get into medical school, Tina talks about her “passion” for science when asked to describe a successful year.

During her junior year, Tina travels to Central America on a study away program to conduct biology experiments and gets her “hands down in the dirty with lots and lots of biology all day.” She then realizes that she can “actually do science on my own....I’m really curious about a lot of things and biology allows me to ask all these different questions and then try to find a way to answer the questions. Her engagement with science spills over to classes outside of her major in her junior year: “I’ve never taken anything with philosophy and every day I walk into class and it blows my mind.” But even though academic engagement themes surface during Tina’s junior year, she still mentions the importance of getting good grades.

In her senior year, Tina continues her love of learning and looks forward to all of her courses. She says, “*A successful senior year?* To feel satisfied with my classes in that I’ve learned as much as I can from those classes or at least that I’ve made the best effort I can to learn from all of them.” As Tina looks back on her four years, she realizes that her college experience has shown her “that I am more than my grades.”

Although he shares Rita’s and Tina’s interest in science, Michael arrives at college with minimal concerns about grades. When asked what would make his first year successful, he responds: “I think I need to enjoy myself. I think that’s the main key to having a successful year... [and] not getting kicked out of school.”

The summer after his first year, Michael takes linear algebra to prepare for more physics courses. When asked why more physics, Michael says, “You know, all the things they talk about, I find really interesting so I decided to kind of go with it. And the more I do, the more interesting things there are that I want to study.” Despite

this expression of engagement at the beginning of his sophomore year, Michael still defines success in other ways—“seeing more places outside of the college” and “getting out into the wilderness”.

The summer before his junior year, Michael does research on campus with a chemistry professor. While some of the work is tedious, he enjoys the investigative part. When asked what would make his junior year successful, Michael says: “Probably just knowing that I got the most out of my classes. Just to be able to take what I learned in class and then extend it into something in the real world.” Michael now includes academic engagement in his narrative of success.

As a senior, Michael is excited about doing an honors project as it affords him the opportunity to do “the whole process of research and not just do an experiment. But plan the experiment, and do it, and... get it published—seeing what it takes to do all that.” His definition of a successful year? “Getting good clean data” for his project, and keeping up with his sport.

Achievement versus Engagement as Markers of Success

Why do students so frequently mention grades when asked to define a successful year for them? One quite practical reason is that colleges use GPAs as thresholds or baseline standards for many things, such as continuing to receive scholarships, registering for courses each semester, or playing on an athletic team. But grades—particularly high ones—also matter in other ways for ambitious students. They can determine whether they are invited to work on an honors project, graduate with Latin honors, get into graduate or professional schools, or secure some high-paying jobs upon graduation.

What about our second question: Why so little talk about academic engagement when students describe a successful year? As the narratives of Rita, Tina and Michael illustrate, students often encounter courses, assignments and instructors that they find engaging; they just don’t consistently express a desire to seek out these experiences when asked about their goals for a successful year. Academic engagement is “episodic” for many students. It is an experience that happens in some courses and in some semesters, not a constant and universal feature of their college experience (Cuba, Jennings, Lovett, Lindkvist & Bates, 2010). Or perhaps students at our highly selective institutions assume that they will be academically engaged and therefore don’t see this as a marker of a successful year.

But engagement can also be risky. Exploring unfamiliar scholarly territory, enrolling in a challenging course, even walking into a faculty member’s office—all of these can be anxiety-producing because they can be wrought with uncertainty about the outcomes. Students who achieve high grades early on may be less averse to the risks of engagement because they have already achieved these conventional markers of college success.

It was particularly disconcerting to discover that the mention of grade themes and engagement themes was negatively correlated in our sample ($r = -.36, p < .05$). Students who mentioned more grade themes over their four years tended to mention fewer engagement themes. For example, Rita—who uses grades each year to define success—never mentions an engagement theme. This pattern is particularly striking in the senior year (see Figure 2). Recall that 51 of the 66 students in our sample mentioned grade themes in their definitions of success in their first year. By senior year, of the 33 students who still included grades in their definition, only 13 (39%) also included engagement themes. By contrast, 14 of the 18 students who no longer included grades in their definitions of success (78%) mentioned engagement themes.

Does All of This Talk about Good Grades Matter?

Throughout their four years, students listed multiple themes when asked to define success in college. The focus of their success narratives ebbs and flows over time. Making friends is important initially as students seek to establish a social network in a new environment; thinking about career-related activities and cementing friendships are more pressing concerns as students imagine life after college. But getting good grades is the drumbeat in students' definitions of success—the most consistently and frequently mentioned theme. Perhaps students are merely responding to an institutional structure that, despite the rhetoric in our mission statements, rewards students who academically achieve.

We are not likely—nor do we wish—to change students' desire to get good grades, but can we find ways to encourage them to supplement this with other metrics of success? We believe our task as college faculty and administrators is to make opportunities for engagement less serendipitous and more deliberate, particularly early in the college experience. Here are some ways we might begin to do so:

Reconstruct the concept of academic success—Recall that Rita describes biology as her “best” class because she is getting an A, even though her “favorite class” is organic chemistry. Tina struggles with feeling successful because her GPA may not be high enough to get into medical school, even though she is developing a passion for biology. We need to find ways of communicating to students that “best” isn't always associated with high grades. If we ask students more about what they learn, how they learn, what challenges their ideas, and what grabs hold of them rather than the more routine question—“How did you do?”—would that help them see success more broadly?

Deconstruct the concept of engagement—Engagement is risky and uncertain in part because we tend not to articulate it well. We often cast engagement as a “state of being” rather than something that occurs around particular assignments, work or courses. Michael became engaged with work in his professor's chemistry lab because he liked “the investigation piece,” even though he found much of the other work tedious. If engagement is episodic and linked to particular kinds of work or

pedagogies, then we need to talk about it to students in these ways. Can we help them identify particular experiences that they find intriguing and better assist them in seeking these out?

Help students understand that engagement has real rewards—Tina says that college “taught me that I was more than grades.” This realization is what we want for all of our students. We think student narratives about engaged learning, like these from our project, have the potential to help other students understand why engagement is more than just frosting on the cake. Highly successful individuals are also highly engaged individuals. Encouraging students to engage academically—in all the various forms that can assume—may indeed increase the likelihood that we can make good on the admirable and ambitious aspirations expressed in our mission statements.

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Table 1. Percentages of students who provided each of the different main themes (in bold) and sub-themes in their definitions of success.

Themes	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4
Academic achievement	86%	92%	85%	88%
Grades	77%	70%	67%	61%
Milestones	15%	53%	20%	11%
Career-oriented act.	9%	21%	36%	65%
Improve skills	6%	0%	8%	2%
Social and residential	71%	52%	44%	56%
Make new friends	56%	9%	11%	3%
Extracurricular act.	29%	33%	24%	18%
Maintain friendships	6%	23%	11%	42%
Find romance	2%	3%	3%	2%
Life management	47%	44%	82%	61%
Well-being	24%	18%	35%	24%
Work ethic	17%	17%	18%	14%
Balance	12%	17%	15%	17%
Satisfied w/ college	2%	0%	8%	30%
Study away	0%	0%	33%	0%
Academic engagement	30%	33%	35%	53%
Desire to learn	20%	24%	26%	18%
Interesting classes	14%	5%	9%	9%
Connect w/ faculty	5%	8%	2%	2%
Explore new areas	3%	0%	0%	5%
Independent study	0%	2%	3%	12%
Honors	0%	2%	5%	18%

Figure 1. Success Themes Over the Four Years

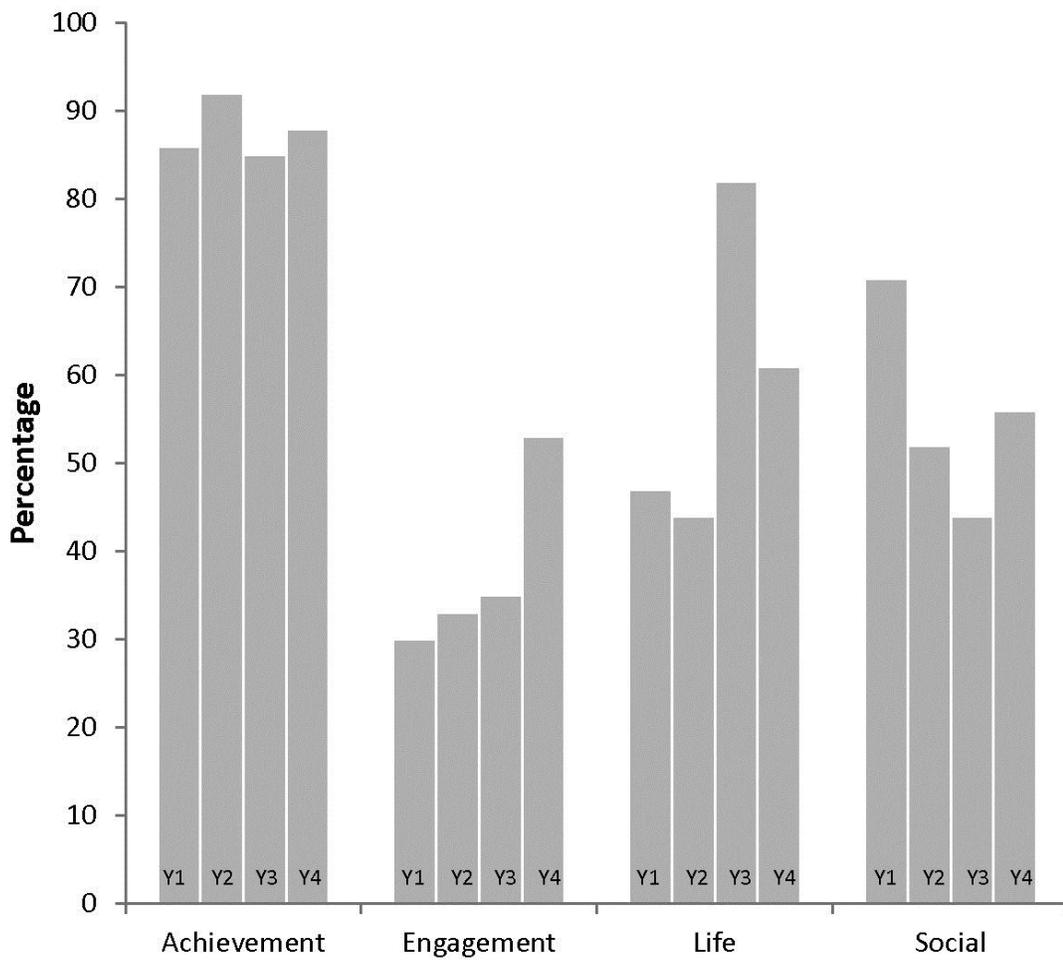
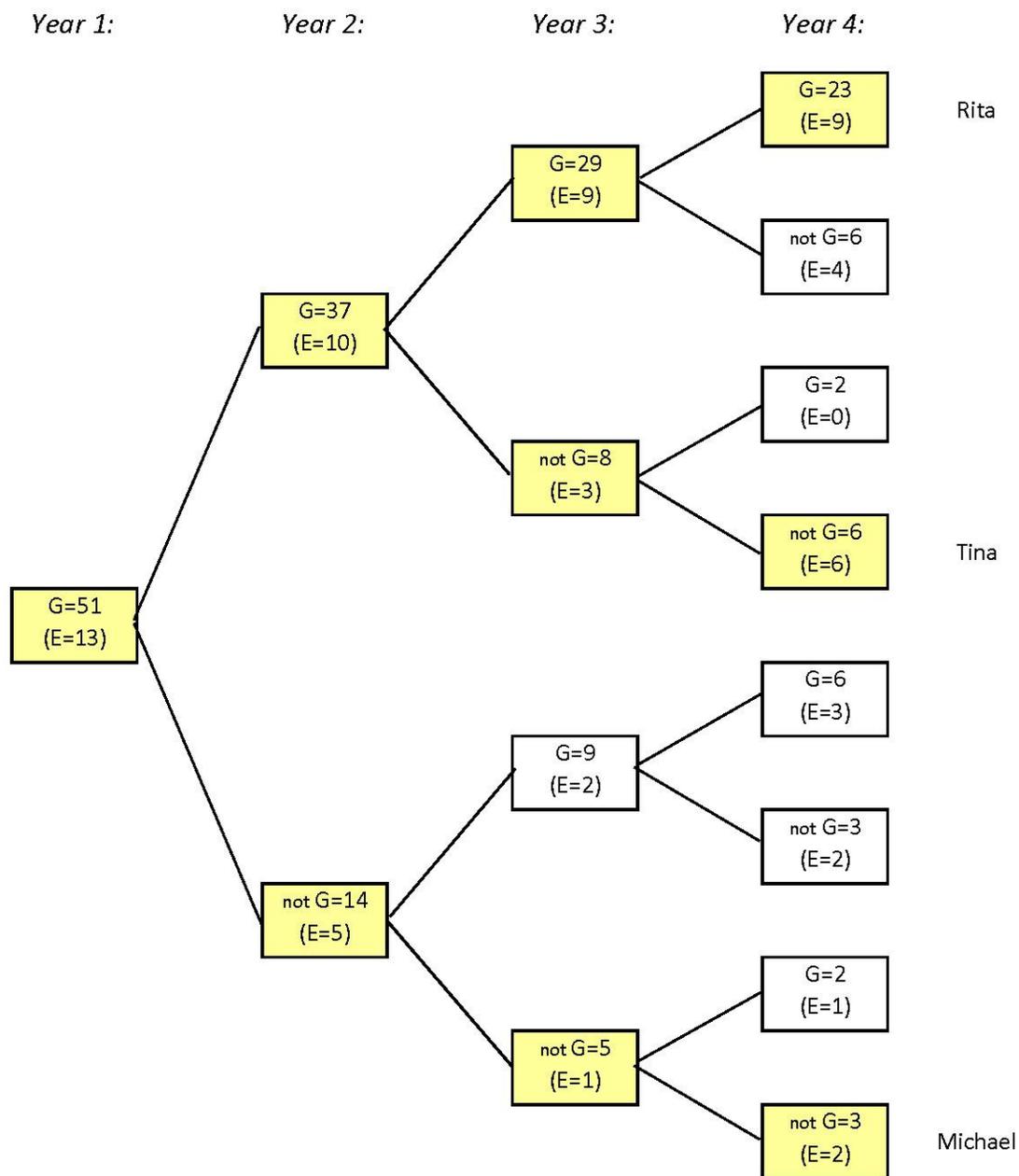


Figure 2. Definitions of Success: Good Grades and Engagement Themes from First Year to Senior Year



Key to abbreviations:

- G = mention of good grades in definition of successful year
- not G = no mention of good grades in definition of successful year
- E = mention of at least one academic engagement theme in definition of successful year