



Ilene Benz

University of Rochester

Warner Graduate School of Education

EDU 497: Teaching and Learning in Higher Education

Most agree that teaching and learning are related to student success (Survey/Interview). Though it is difficult to pinpoint when learning actually takes place, it is clear that it takes both active teachers and active students in order for students to reach their goals. This discussion will attempt to define what student success is and what the roles and responsibilities of teachers and students are in this achievement.

Basic definitions from Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary defines a *student* as "a scholar, learner: especially one who attends school; one who studies: an attentive and systematic observer" and *success* as "a degree of measure of succeeding; favorable or desired outcome; attainment of wealth, favor, or eminence."

The vagueness of these definitions are reinforced by faculty, administrators, and staff (referred to as "professionals" throughout the rest of this text), twelve of whom responded to a survey and offered similar definitions of student success which can be summarized as (Survey/Interview, also see Appendix for survey/interview questions):

- ◆ the fulfillment of academic goals based on how the student defines them;
- ◆ students are successful when they get involved and gain something from the experience;
- ◆ each student defines success differently and the achievement of the goals students set for themselves will be their success;
- ◆ we must tap into the diversity of each student and individually define success;
- ◆ the academic and social aspects of student development - these are as unique as the individual; and
- ◆ pleasure and pride are determining factors of success.

Interestingly enough, only the following *general* definitions of student success were collectively offered by the twelve students who also responded to this survey (Survey/Interview):

- ◆ success is relative to the individual student and comes in varying degrees for each person;
- ◆ success exists when someone is satisfied with the work accomplished, knowing that the learning and experience will be remembered always;
- ◆ success can and cannot be measured, it depends on the individual's own goals; and
- ◆ the success of any individual is based largely on that person's view of what he/she is doing or wants to do.

Most of these students offered more specific definitions of student success, such as those summarized here:

- ◆ success is defined by good grades which support graduation and transfer opportunities;
- ◆ determination, dedication and discipline characterize success and are demonstrated through attendance and hard work;
- ◆ success is paying attention and a willingness to learn demonstrated through note taking, completed homework assignments, timely work and asking questions all resulting in good grades;
- ◆ avoiding frustration and conflict by working closely with others and the teacher to understand concepts and their application to real life;
- ◆ student success is good grades, honors class participation, involvement in school programs and ultimately a good job - others find success in achieving these same goals with a 4.0 GPA and valuing the respect and friendships that this work yields along the way;
- ◆ three constants of success include putting schoolwork at the top of the "To Do" list, reliability and promptness, and following through on assignments;

- ◆ success is an attitude that looks like happiness, calmness and determination so students who succeed are calm, relaxed, awake and attentive, on time for class, smiling, and ready and willing to participate/learn in class; and
- ◆ preparation (studying, reading), perseverance (keeping at a task until it is clearly understood) and consistency (maintaining a regular study and homework schedule) is the definition of student success.

During interviews, several of the “professionals” provided more specifics about their definition of student success, including that it:

- ◆ involves the student in the learning process so that he/she leaves class with significantly more knowledge than when he/she entered;
- ◆ is achieving an “A” or “B” in classes within and outside of the major discipline;
- ◆ is a process where students celebrate each success along the way toward a goal;
- ◆ is achieving the objectives of a specific course and making connections between concepts learned, real life and the goal to be achieved;
- ◆ reflects confidence, enthusiasm and pride;
- ◆ includes taking advantage of institutional resources;
- ◆ is achievement with grades commensurate with ability;
- ◆ is the demonstration of knowledge by helping others master the skill;
- ◆ means that the student takes responsibility for their learning by identifying new perspectives and enthusiastically shares what they’ve learned;
- ◆ is conflict, resolution and excitement; and

- ◆ means that the student works with the professor to understand requirements and learn the teacher's style, attends regularly, spends time to learn material and works at understanding concepts.

Students and professionals offered somewhat of a dichotomy in the way they expressed their behavioral definitions of student success. Some of these differences may be attributed to the stage each group is in life. When interviewed (Survey/Interview), most professionals discussed learning and success based on long-term goals of life and most students considered the short term goals of completing a class, graduating, transferring and getting a job. One definition of student success may be a combination of these extremes: the short term completion of a task, class and degree along with long term goal attainment of a career and becoming a lifelong learner who applies learned concepts and skills to satisfy individual dreams.

Summarized results of the survey and interview discussions offer another definition of student success as a process or series of attitudes and behaviors including dedication, willingness, attentiveness, active involvement, discipline, discomfort, perseverance, celebration, and pride. Many of these characteristics reflect the values and requirements reported in the Search Institute's "Asset Approach" to success. The forty assets described in this study have been identified as critical components contributing to a young person's ability to succeed which is defined by the Institute as the ability to "make wise decisions, choose positive paths and grow up competent, caring and responsible (Search Institute)."

Student success begins with **dedication**. Many students fail because they have not made a commitment to what they want to achieve. Those who decide to reach their goals will do so when they individually make this decision for themselves (Lehrer). The motivation

comes from within and the outcomes must appear clearly to students as a reason for and positive result of this effort (Landis). Once the decision is made consciously and individually, students have more of a **willingness** to succeed. They have a focus and understand their ability and the requirements of reaching that goal. The dedication and willingness to achieve manifests into attentiveness, active involvement and discipline. Students practicing these behaviors will be more likely to avoid distractions that, if followed, may alter their course. Steadfast **attention** to the goal will engage them in activities required for attainment. The **active involvement** needed can be evident through a variety of behaviors including prompt attendance and completed work, class participation in the form of dialog and questions and interaction with others regarding course content. This may also be evident in the way the student takes advantage of additional resources offered beyond the classroom that will aid success. This level of engagement is easy to begin and challenging to maintain. The **discipline** to continue this focus and involvement over time is often a significant discriminant of success. Those likely to achieve will be those who work through the confusions that come with learning and stretching beyond what is known. This **discomfort** is part of the learning and growth process. Overcoming uncertainty, building self-esteem and maintaining focus through confusion and failure is perhaps the definition of **perseverance**. Once past this stage, the work seems worth the effort and the **celebration** of goal attainment can begin. The result of this work and achieving this goal creates a sense of **pride** that is derived from one's own feelings of accomplishment and the support and praise of others. Most everyone surveyed agreed that success is truly a learning experience (Survey/Interview).

While learning can take place individually, using the definition of “student” provided earlier, there must be a teacher or facilitator directing the learning process. The next question to be answered then is about the roles and responsibilities of each - the student and teacher - that contribute to this success.

At first glance, the responses of this survey seem to define student success as solely the responsibility of the student. One interesting realization about how students and professionals defined success was in the approach to the answer. Students who answered the survey mainly focused on their role and responsibilities until specifically asked about the Instructor’s role. Professionals also mainly discussed the role and responsibilities of students in their definition of student success. This may lead to the belief that Instructor’s have no responsibility to create student success since that success is individually defined by each student. However, after discussions with members of each group, the responsibilities actually rest 100% with the student *and* 100% with the teacher on a continually revolving schedule shared by both student and Instructor. The role and responsibilities of each as identified through the surveys and interviews were largely similar for each group. When these roles and responsibilities are grouped into a chronological order, such as from the beginning to the end of a semester, passed back and forth between student and Instructor, they resemble a series or stages of development. The liberty of grouping and labeling these five (5) stages of student success has been taken here and includes: Ambition Stage, Ground Rules Stage, Human Factors Stage, Change Stage and the Relationship Stage. Many of the roles and responsibilities of the student and Instructor during this development process closely resemble behaviors described in the Situation Leadership model (Blanchard) of organizational success.

Students come to college for several reasons. Some attend with a fairly specific plan of action, others come to avoid a specific plan of action and others simply find their way to a classroom and feel they have succeeded. With or without clearly defined goals, the first act of attending class, the **Ambition Stage** of Student Success, presents the student with a variety of opportunities to succeed. Instructors must recognize this time of great opportunity and do what they can to direct the student down the path to success. Since the student may be highly committed to this new act, but not feel competent or confident enough to succeed, the role of the Instructor is one of guidance and direction so that competence and confidence can be developed (Blanchard). The Instructor should get to know the student and help identify personal, realistic goals and develop a plan for achieving them. Also, the Instructor at this stage should explain how the particular course will lead to the student's goals.

From the first meeting, the Instructor can foster success by creating a comfortable and safe learning environment. As part of this **Ground Rules Stage**, in order for students to feel as though they are headed in the right direction with everything to gain, they must understand the rules and requirements of the class. When an Instructor provides the specifics of the class at this early point in the semester the student no longer has to play the "what am I thinking game (Matthias)" with the Instructor. Instead, the student will know specifically what is expected in order to successfully complete the requirements of the class. After clearly explaining the guidelines of work to be produced and checking for clarification, the Instructor should model these behaviors by being prepared, on time, responsible and professional as well. It becomes the student's role to follow up by asking questions and completing these requirements.

Students will continue to test the safety of their environment. The Instructor must maintain a comfort level through patience, a sincere interest in each student's success and by maintaining the expectations set forth at the onset of the class. It should be apparent that all students are respected, viewed as equally important and unique and treated fairly by being offered the same opportunities, encouragement and support. When the student is treated as the Instructor expects to be treated effective learning can take place (Matthias).

The student must demonstrate that their goals are truly important during this stage through prompt attendance and assignments and proactively asking questions and sharing ideas, knowledge and opinions that contribute to the learning environment for all. Professionally completed work (beyond the minimal expectations set by the Instructor) is another way to communicate that the course is being taken seriously as is a positive attitude that is self-encouraging and focused on the likelihood of success.

The student's willingness, motivation, involvement and preparation should be at least matched by the Instructor's own excitement about what is taught. The Instructor should build enjoyment and fun into learning exercises, encourage active involvement and empower the student in their own learning. Class time should demonstrate the Instructor's up-to-date skill & knowledge in the discipline without the notion that the Instructor is superior. This can be done by being honest when mistakes are made, admitting to them and sharing that the classroom is a place of learning for all - Instructor and student alike.

After the ground rules are understood and set, the **Human Factors Stage** begins. As the student-teacher relationship develops, the Instructor should get to know the student as a person and vice versa. Methods for achieving this level of personal interaction are in, before and after class one-on-one conversations as well as meetings outside of class. This allows

the Instructor to identify teaching and communication techniques that best meet student needs as well as make connections between class concepts and life goals. The student must take advantage of this time to get to know and work with the Instructor. These meetings allow the student to get help they need, understand their learning preferences and further formalize their success plan by applying class ideas to personal goals. This is also often seen as a gesture of respect for and interest in the student as an adult.

The more “human” the Instructor seems to the student at this point, the more the student will open up themselves - but the Instructor must take the lead (Sandy). With this relationship between Instructor and student beginning to form, goals become clearer, seem more attainable and the student becomes more excited about them. This short time spent one-on-one allows ongoing dialog to become easier and more natural, allowing the student’s needs to be uncovered and the Instructor to identify ways to help the student fill those gaps.

The Instructor should entice curiosity and stimulate interest in class content through enthusiasm and applicable examples. Explanations should be clear and easy-to-follow and as personable as possible. When the Instructor is excited about the course and positions material as important and relevant, the student must take that lead and explore connections between the content and their goal through active participation including discussions, questions, activities and group interactions. Learning is often a collaborative and participative process, “not something one person does to another (King).” To maintain this level of interaction and involvement, the Instructor should build into the class opportunities for students to get to know one another and be specific about how students should interact (Landis).

The student should be challenged to stretch beyond their comfort level to learn and grow. The student must spend the time and effort to make sense out of concepts and apply

classroom learning to life. Activities demonstrating this effort by the student include questioning for understanding, responding to assignments as completely and thoughtfully as possible and spending time to practice, complete assignments and study on a regular basis (Landis). The response from the Instructor should be honest feedback, provided often and immediately, about work which offers recognition for a job well done as well as improvement opportunities. The task then is again returned to the student who is responsible for taking the feedback seriously, not defensively or in defeat, by reviewing and correcting the Instructor's comments on assignments and asking follow-up questions with a focus on learning and improving. The student must work to understand and make connections between concepts and objectives while the Instructor openly and proactively communicates to help them understand and make these connections.

This **Change Stage** is a critical turning point in the learning process and the relationship between student and Instructor. During the challenge, failure and growth that happens here, the student may have a low level of competence in the topic area leading to a dip in confidence and, therefore, commitment. The key role of the Instructor is to "coach" the student toward success and encourage the focus to be on a positive, enabling attitude and techniques for the student to build confidence and competence in the subject matter. (Blanchard)

The degree of attention and understanding given to a student's individual needs is often based on the respect and trust that grows from open communication between the Instructor and the student during the **Relationship Stage**. If the student is frustrated and not receiving the help needed it is possible that their interest and commitment will decrease, making

success highly unlikely (Rogers). The Instructor should be a mentor at this stage. The extent of this role varies in degree based on the relationship and needs of the student. The Instructor can simply be a listening board for the student, be involved in identifying resources related and unrelated to class and/or support the student in their decision to fail.

To provide a sounding board for the student, the Instructor must be accessible and make time to be available to meet and actively and openly listen to their needs. The student must take advantage of these opportunities by making use of office hours, phone calls and E-mail communication methods. Once heard, the Instructor can decide on the follow-up advice and information needed to further support student confidence and success.

The Instructor must realize that it takes more than intelligence and motivation to succeed. Critical success factors for students also include learning how to manage anxiety, studying, test taking and time (Survey/Interview, Dr. Kostecke). Therefore, an important part of the role of the Instructor at this stage is to know the services available for students and actively make connections between student needs and these institutional resources (counseling, writing center, library, job fairs, study skills, etc.). The institution also has a role in student success at this point which is to provide the support functions for the student and Instructor that enable both to succeed (Darling-Hammond).

When the student actively maintains a relationship with the Instructor through an ongoing dialog of needs and enables the Instructor to serve as a sounding board and a reference to resources, the student's competence, confidence and commitment increases (Blanchard). The Instructor should continue to follow-up with the student to offer ongoing encouragement toward success. However, once a suggestion is made, it is the student's responsibility to take

advantage of the information and/or ancillary service(Blanchard). Often this delegation affects the level of short term (at least) success the student will experience.

Even though an ongoing dialog exists, a student is continually responsible to maintain their work ethic throughout the course. This includes eliminating distractions and excuses, overcoming obstacles, managing time and setting priorities. When a student achieves and maintains this level of commitment, the Instructor should promptly recognize and reward this behavior. If expectations set by the Instructor are not met, the Instructor's role is to manage consequences immediately and accordingly. This is a critical role as the actions taken or avoided here may affect the learning environment for all students of the class. The Instructor must maintain a focus on the students who want to learn and not be distracted or drained by those who do not. Therefore, the Instructor must be prepared to teach the lesson of "failure" to those who choose, by their behaviors, that learning experience.

The role and responsibilities of the Instructor is never complete and the student-Instructor relationship should not be terminated when the class ends or a student decides to fail. Ongoing, proactive assistance, at least in the form of accessibility, time and concern within and outside the classroom, when students are and are not ready for support is a constant role of the Instructor. Even when a student has demonstrated an unwillingness to perform, the Instructor should be ready and willing to accept the student when they decide to re-engage in the learning process. (King)

To reinforce the importance of lifelong learning, continual improvement and dedication to success, the Instructor should request student input regarding class management, content and activities and use student feedback where appropriate. This once again demonstrates to

the student respect, interest and equality. The student must take this request seriously and offer honest, constructive feedback.

So, can all students succeed? Survey respondents are split on their answer to this. Many believe anyone can do anything they put their mind to - as long as they work hard enough. Yet, several responded that the goals that students set are not always realistic based on their timeline and the effort they are willing to commit. Often the rude awakening of the work involved to attain their goal results in failure before they even engage in their quest. Thus, a conclusion one can reach about the ability of all students to succeed may truly be based on the relationship between the student and the professional. “Madeline Hunter...defined success as a feeling of forward motion (Rogers).” Though the student must be willing to journey, Instructors, professionals and students need to make a coordinated effort to give students a chance to succeed. This type of teamwork helps to create realistic goals with a clear course of action. The relationships developed through this process support a continuous focus and encourage celebrations along the way. It may take a lifetime, but when success happens, the journey is well worth the effort.

## Resource List

- Blanchard, Ken, "Situational Leadership II: The Article," Blanchard Training & Development, Inc., CA, 1994.
- Darling-Hammond, Linda, "Restructuring Schools for Student Success," *Daedalus: American Education: Still Separate - Still Unequal*, Vol. 124, No. 4, pp. 153 - 162, Journal of the American Academy of Arts & Sciences, Fall, 1995.
- King, Nancy, "The Pitfalls and Pleasures of Mindful Teaching," *About Teaching*, No. 53, University of Delaware, Fall 1999.  
[www.udel.edu/cte/aboutteach/fall99/king.html](http://www.udel.edu/cte/aboutteach/fall99/king.html)
- Landis, Ray, "Enhancing Student Success," *Success 101*, Discovery Press, CA, Spring 1998. [www.discovery-press.com/success101/1998spring.htm](http://www.discovery-press.com/success101/1998spring.htm)
- Lehrer, Stanley, "How to Assure Student Success," *USA Today*, Society for the Advancement of Education, NY, Vol. 117, Issue 2527, April 1989, p. 12.
- Matthias, Dirk, "Students Speak Out on Effective Instruction at UD," *About Teaching*, No. 53, Newark, DE: Center for Teaching Effectiveness and the University of Delaware, Fall 1999. [www.udel.edu/cte/aboutteach/fall99/matthias.html](http://www.udel.edu/cte/aboutteach/fall99/matthias.html)
- Rogers, Spence, Ludington, Jim, Graham, Shari, Motivation & Learning: A Teacher's Guide to Building Excitement for Learning & Igniting the Drive for Quality, "Chapter One: Student Motivation," Peak Learning Systems, CO, 1999.  
[www.peaklearn.com/chap1.htm](http://www.peaklearn.com/chap1.htm)
- Sandy, Leo R., "The Effective Teacher," Plymouth State College  
<http://oz.plymouth.edu/~lsandy/effective.html>

***Resource List, continued***

Search Institute, "The Asset Approach: Giving Kids What They Need to Succeed,"

Healthy Communities - Healthy Youth Initiative, MN, 1997.

[www.search-institute.org](http://www.search-institute.org)

Survey and Interview responses to "Student Success: Behaviorally Defined

Responsibilities," conducted from 3/6/00 - 4/3/00. (See Survey attached.)

12 students from 3 Public Speaking classes, 1 Interpersonal Communication class and

1 Media Communication: Issues & Analysis class.

12 professionals: *Administrators:* Cynthia Cooper, Director of Public Affairs; Randy Johnson,

Visual & Performing Arts Dept. Chair (Interior Design Faculty); Dr. Susan Salvador, Vice

President of Student Services; *Professional Staff:* Dr. Ron Kostecke, Counselor;

France McCloskey, Tutor; *Faculty:* Lee Adnepos, English-Philosophy (Honors

Programs); Jim Coffey, Speech; Karen Coffey, Speech; David Day, Anthropology; Frances

Dearing, Speech; Tom Proietti, Communication; Betty Saunders,

Speech/Music.

Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary, Merriam-Webster, Inc., MA, 1984.