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Reframing the Seductive Narrative of "Success" in Open Admissions

The Seductive Narratives of "Success"

THE NARRATIVES OF SUCCESS THAT HAVE DRIVEN ENTREPRENEURSHIP for the last century have also pervaded the discourses of higher education, even those of open access. Perhaps the influence of the private sector should be no surprise as many community colleges are products of the 1960s when a new American community college opened its doors each week just as the country experienced unprecedented economic growth (Floyd 218). Nevertheless, such narratives deserve examination, especially as they raise necessary questions about student agency and institutional motivation.

The typical hero narrative serves as one example. In the open-access institution, this narrative can take the shape of the student who "succeeds" despite her working-class background. It runs parallel to other narratives currently orbiting around immigration, class, and race. I've cringed during the last four commencements as my community college's president shouted into the microphone to the graduates: "How many of you were told you weren't 'college material' [deafening applause from audience]?" His question underscores the presumption that those students in their caps and gowns needed to be saved from their pre-determined futures because, until they found our community college, they were not going to be able to achieve the trappings of "success" in the conventional, middle-class sense: job, house, car, vacation, etc. (I do not place the word "success" in quotation marks to be pejorative; rather, I place it in quotes throughout this piece as a reminder that the "success" sold to students is a story—a fantasy—and when I use quotes around the term, I am implying all that the unreal fantasy means.)

Narratives of "success" make those invested in a more critical pedagogy[1] uncomfortable because they place the institution in the position of the hero and the teacher (as the institution's agent) in the de-facto position of the hero. Imagine no graduation, though. Without the cap and gown, is anyone the hero of the narrative? Or is it only through successful completion that the narrative can be fulfilled, as with most predominant cultural narratives (think American Dream)? And are we, as institutional agents, easily seduced by this Hollywood-style ending? Who wouldn't be?

I propose, though, that this blind drive toward "success" in open access can be damaging to the health of writing instruction. While campaigns for student "success" appear benign on the surface and indeed provide valuable data for quantitative analysis, their over-reliance on the rhetoric of "success" results in devaluing any progress not measurable through persistence and attainment (retention and graduation), constructing a simplistic and entrenched middle-class notion of achievement. "Success," then, becomes a false, institutional construct reified through the language of national initiatives. In these cases, successful/unsuccessful students act within a self-reproducing narrative in which "success" is the finish line at the end of a race instead of a milestone on a timeline of growth; and in this way, "success" operates as an ideology that runs counter to the educational principles of curiosity, critical thinking, and lifelong learning. In his article "The Coming Apocalypse," Richard Miller presents a definition of modern education that reinforces these principles: "Finding the limits of what we know is an abiding activity of higher education and an essential part of clearing space and time for future endeavors to better understand the human condition. But equally important is the effort to get to work in that newly cleared space" (148). Too often students in community colleges students miss the opportunity to sit in that space and "work," as Miller says, because they are moving so quickly through their studies.

On my campus, "success" is a faculty code. It refers to how many students got through your composition courses in a given quarter—what was your "success rate"? The answer one offers may prompt a raised eyebrow if the number is too high or too low. Less anecdotally, the use of "success" as a defining element in community colleges can be traced back some years in open-access scholarship. In 1994 Marlene Griffith and Ann Connor, both community college faculty, called for a different definition of success that transcends the 1950s junior college concept "of linear progression [that] ignores the reality of our student population" (129). They articulate what those of us teaching in open access see every day: an interrupted pattern for the community college student may actually mean success in the end.

Thomas Mortenson calls this latter pattern the "educational pipeline" in his 2005 article "Measurements of Persistence." Students stall or move right through this pipeline often

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1. I acknowledge that I use the term "critical pedagogy" perhaps loosely here. The spectrum of critical pedagogies ranges from the liberatory work of Paulo Freire (1970) to the critical citizenship work of Kurt Spellmeyer (1993) to the liberal democratic work of Nell Ann Pickett (1988). While disparate in their practice of critical pedagogy, I believe most of those who identify as critical pedagogues would be uncomfortable with the premise that they "saved" a student with education. As David Seitz argues so well in *Who Can Afford Critical Consciousness: Practicing a Pedagogy of Humility*, the root of critical practice lies in the smaller, teachable moments that often go overlooked. Enacting a pedagogy that recognizes these moments, he says, "keeps both teacher and students attentive to the situations before them, particularly in the connections between the students' research and the multidimensional dynamics of the critical writing classroom" (235).

depending on the type of institution they attend and the selectivity of the admissions process. For instance, highly selective colleges showed a 91.6 percent retention rate in first-year to second-year persistence, while open access colleges showed a 60.6 percent rate the same year. What his analysis of various data sets demonstrates, above all, is the malleability of data when considering persistence and time to degree. He notes, "College graduation rates for those who start college may be decreasing or increasing, depending on the data set used. Or, if one uses the longest data set (from the Census Bureau), college graduation rates may be unchanged over the last fifty years" (44).

Students in Mortenson's pipeline might not move in just one direction. Perhaps it could be useful to imagine the pipeline having valves and levers that create more of a maze-like flow, complete with disruptions and sharp turns. If we can imagine the pipeline as a narrative, such disruptions only work to make the story more interesting. Instead of becoming deterrents from a straight path, the disruptions become the stuff-of-life that make open-access students' lives so rich, and so complicated.

> "the disruptions become the stuff-of-life that make open-access students' lives so rich, and so complicated"

Marketing "Success"

Community colleges are peddling "success" to students through billboards and advertisements. This advertising discourse positions educational "success" as a marketable item before students walk onto campus. This position facilitates the construction of the student as consumer. In this way, "success" represents a lexicon of words designed to sell the institution and a version of the hero narrative to students. Tracing the use of terms like "success" can help us, as rhetoricians and educators committed to open access, mark a culture shift from an academic to an entrepreneurial and/or marketized model of higher education. How does the language of advertising position students within this marketized model? I suggest that the educational pipeline is sold as a product that is not congruent with how higher education operates once students are in school. We don't offer satisfaction, a warrantee, returns, or a money-back guarantee—the things consumers have become accustomed to in the marketplace.

The same phenomenon exists in other countries with different terms. In her 2008 critical linguistic analysis *Language and Power,* Andrea Mayr identifies that in Britain the term "enterprising" can be traced through job ads, university websites, and training literature to reveal how educational discourse has been transformed into managerial discourse. Mayr says

that the term "represents a culture change within business from bureaucratic to 'entrepreneurial' styles of management . . . . [I]t now permeates management discourse, which in turn has colonized the discourse of universities and many other public institutions" (28-9). She cites the University of Oxford as a primary example of embedding enterprise discourse into its advertising. One ad for Oxford states: "Among UK universities, Oxford is at the forefront of encouraging enterprise among students, teachers and researchers. It prides itself on its success in transforming enquiry and invention into commercial ventures" (30). "Enterprise" signifies the spirit of hard work and industrialism here, encouraged by the institution, which is also enterprising in finding funding. While Oxford uses the word "success" as well, notice that Oxford positions itself as the successful agent, not the student. The student is "enterprising."

Just as the word "enterprising" targets students in Britain, "success" targets students in United States advertising. For instance, billboards from Sinclair Community College in Dayton, OH, advertise:

"We Did It.

YOU CAN

www.sinclair.edu

Success Starts Here!"

The type is positioned to the right of a picture of three students wearing occupational uniforms. One woman wears medical scrubs, one man appears to wear a fire or police officer shirt, and the second man wears a polo-type, generic work shirt. Sinclair wants the synthetic personal pronoun "we" to represent these successful students and create camaraderie with future students, but it actually represents the institution in this ad. As Norman Fairclough, a critical discourse analyst who works with educational and other types of discourse, explains in *Language and Power,* pronouns such as "we" can signify a mass of people (128). However, in this case, the "we" represents the actual institution of Sinclair Community College, not individuals or a mass of people. These three students function as the corporate identity for the institution, as the model for "success" in their uniforms and in their occupational personas. The "YOU," again, refers to the mass of consumers; the students who want to be successful and to obtain occupations. Students may be targeted individually in the ad with the pronoun "YOU," but they function more as a collective customer base. And an insider/outsider attitude operates here, as well. Potential students, as the audience for the ad, are not part of the "we" because they have not "done it"—they have not yet succeeded. But they need education to succeed, like these three students, in order to be a valuable part of the workforce.

Sinclair is not alone. Many community colleges use "success" in their ads. Consider the following copy from Cincinnati State: "Go Ahead. Get There. It's All About Your Success."

North Carolina Community Colleges have an umbrella slogan for community colleges not just at one college, but for all colleges across the state: "Creating Success: North Carolina Community Colleges. Hope. Opportunity. Jobs." "Success" likewise begins at Metropolitan State Community College of Denver and Imperial Valley College, as their website logos indicate (Metropolitan State College: "Where success beings with you"; Imperial Valley College: "Where Success Begins").

 "Success," as it is widely marketed by community colleges, sells education as a product. The tangible "success," narrative whether it be landing a job or transferring to a four-year institution, "begins" or "starts" at the community colleges that advertise it; yet, just because students begin that trek toward success, doesn't mean they finish. As the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) research reveals, fifty percent of entering students will not persist to the second year.

Students do not get to take home this product they may view as a durable good instead of a process, which could create disillusionment. Are students unhappy with the product they were sold, or are outside pressures too much to bear along with pursuing an education? Perhaps the reasons for lack of persistence are more complicated than we, or CCSSE, can imagine. The "success" narrative morphs into each student's unique situation after admission, making the ideal educational pipeline difficult to achieve and likewise difficult to trace in a survey, which I illustrate later in this article.

"Success": Persistence and Social vs. Cultural Capital

A reminder of Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of social and cultural capital helps to frame my later discussion of "success" and how it is constructed for institutions of higher learning through instruments such as the CCSSE. More background on CCSSE follows, but for the purposes of this discussion, CCSSE provides community colleges around the country with a survey instrument called the Survey of Entering Student Engagement (SENSE). Connecting persistence after the first quarter to the relationships between faculty/staff and students is part of CCSSE's mission.

Ryan Wells discusses precisely these relationship factors in his 2008 article, "The Effects of Social and Cultural Capital on Student Persistence: Are Community Colleges More Meritocratic?" He also points to the social and cultural capital that Pierre Bourdieu identifies in "The Forms of Capital" and uses those forms of capital as a lens through which to interpret data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study on persistence and attainment.

According to Bourdieu, social capital derives from the communities or networks in which a person interacts. A social network comprises the group or groups of people a person uses to gain footing, relationships, information, or knowledge within their realm of experi-

ence. Bourdieu states, "The reproduction of social capital is an unceasing effort of socialibility, a continuous series of exchanges in which recognition is endlessly confirmed and reaffirmed." (246).

Cultural capital, on the other hand, is the capital a person already has by virtue of their birth into a certain family and socioeconomic status, as Wells reads it. Yet Bourdieu breaks cultural capital into three categories: the embodied, objectified, and institutionalized states. Most appropriate to this discussion is the institutionalized state from which cultural capital emerges in the form of a degree. He explains how this cultural capital conferred by an institution then becomes economic capital, the very presumption on which both the SENSE survey and the "success" advertisements and logos are based. Bourdieu explains:

> With the academic qualification, a certificate of cultural competence which confers on its holder a conventional, constant, legally guaranteed value with respect to culture, social alchemy produces a form of cultural capital which has a relative autonomy vis-à-vis its bearer and even vis-à-vis the cultural capital he effectively possesses at a given moment in time. (244)

Read through this lens, the SENSE survey constructs persistence in terms of a product – a piece of cultural capital to possess. Wells' reminder of Bourdieu's forms of capital and how they connect to open access is a welcome one, and I will apply it to the survey in what follows. But because Wells conflates the two categories (social and cultural capital) into one category in his analysis, I worry that he may generalize data into one larger, broader category than is useful. For instance, from the data the survey gathers, CCSSE claims one of the biggest factors in persistence remains the social networks students develop within the institution. This social capital is very separate from the cultural capital that constructs students' lives and institutional goals in Bourdieu's terms. By keeping social and cultural capital separate, unlike Wells, I allow space to account for students' multi-faceted identities and their complicated reasons for non-persistence.

Nevertheless, Wells supports his conclusion with data that seems true to my experience as an open-access educator: "Social and cultural capital have a smaller positive effect on persistence in community colleges than they do on persistence in 4-year institutions (i.e., individual background matters more at 4-year institutions, implying that community colleges may be more meritocratic)" (31).

> "space to account for students' multi-faceted identities and their complicated reasons for non-persistence"

So what role does social capital play in student persistence? According to *After Admission: From College Access to College Success*, authored by James E. Rosenbaum, Regina Deil-Amen, and Ann E. Person, social relationships and institutional structures hold equal responsibility for the lack of student persistence. They argue that complex institutional processes of registration and advising make it very difficult for students to persist when they are not insiders with social capital in the world of academia. By re-imagining institutional structures and making them more student-friendly as occupational and vocational colleges do, the authors argue that students may perceive they have a stronger social capital and feel more supported.

The social capital Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, and Person want to create involves setting up structures for the first-generation college student to feel a part of the social network of higher education, assuming they will experience "success" as a result. Recommendations like those, though, rest on the understanding of "success" as persistence based on a feeling of belonging to the educational community. They find that "Community colleges use procedures that seem to be based on the assumption that students already have certain attributes – plans, motivations, information, social skills, and job search skills. Students who do not have them have difficulties in community colleges" (19). Yet, if students were attracted by the "success" ads on the websites and billboards that I discussed above, perhaps they do not value an undergraduate social network. Perhaps they came for the product: the uniform, the job, the successful transfer. In fact, Rosenbaum, et al. say as much: "All students are admitted to college, but remedial programs are the only accommodation for the new students. Obviously, this is not working. Students mistakenly expect to get a degree, when in fact, large portions fail every year, blame themselves, and do not realize these failures were easily predictable" (23). While Rosenbaum et al. blame institutional procedures for such failures, I suggest a critical analysis of the language that seeks to seduce students to the community college and retain them once there may reveal another area of blame.

CCSSE and SENSE

To investigate the narratives of "success" that pervade the public discourse of open-access institutions, I attend specifically to a discourse that perpetuates this language: the language of a predominant national survey created by the CCSSE. Headquartered at The University of Texas at Austin, CCSSE began its work to benchmark student learning and "success" in 2001 with the support of organizations including The Pew Charitable Trusts and the Lumina Foundation for Education. These two funders also support the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), which has been administered to first- and second-year students at four-year schools since 1998. While the two surveys have similar aims (to measure effective practice in

education and connect those practices to larger institutional outcomes), their method of delivery and target audience are different. NSSE direct mails the survey to students, but CCSSE asks faculty to administer surveys during class time. CCSSE makes results public, while NSSE's results are public at an individual institution's discretion. Community colleges can more readily compare their performance with peer institutions as a result. Each survey has an advisory board and is led by one director who is supported by an extensive research and administrative staff.

My college participates in CCSSE initiatives and the SENSE survey (Survey of Entering Student Engagement), as do 120 other community colleges in thirty states, according to CCSSE. For several years in a row, I received a big manila envelope around the third week of the quarter containing surveys to distribute to my students during class. They were accompanied by a strongly-worded letter from my assistant provost: the surveys must be administered during a certain week; they must be returned; they are important! The first few times, too busy with grading or planning or my stuff-of-life, I just complied. By the third time, though, I actually took out one of the surveys and read it. I started to wonder what the survey was measuring and if it was indeed possible to measure students and their eventual success or ability to succeed. Because people subscribe to different understandings of "success," it becomes a slippery point to measure through the course of a term, and I had to imagine, a broad, national survey.

CCSSE provides a myriad of assessment instruments from surveys to benchmarking to special focus groups, with the focus on student persistence and attainment—because the "success" for this initiative is defined as *persistence and attainment*. As two clearly measurable elements, persistence and attainment determine an institution's level of "success." According to CCSSE's mission statement, they provide a product in these assessment tools: "community and technical colleges need assessment tools appropriate to their unique missions and the characteristics of their diverse student populations. The Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) is meeting that need" (CCSSE).

In the description of the SENSE survey, CCSSE explains:

The Survey of Entering Student Engagement (*SENSE*) helps community and technical colleges focus on the "front door" of the college experience. Grounded in research about what works in retaining and supporting entering students, *SENSE* collects and analyzes data about institutional practices and student behaviors in the earliest weeks of college. These data can help colleges understand students' critical early experiences and improve institutional practices that affect student success in the first college year. (SENSE)

Once a college has the data from the survey, CCSSE wants them to use it to "improve

institutional practices that affect student success in the first college year," as stated above. What are the institutional practices that SENSE measures? According to CCSSE, the biggest impact on retention is the relationship students establish with faculty and staff. Therefore, the questions that SENSE asks students often deal with advising and relationship-building practices with faculty. However, the students who need this relationship spend little time on campus: the survey itself states that 76 percent of all students in community colleges enroll part-time, while only 24 percent enroll full-time.

Standard CCSSE measures of "success"—earning a degree, transferring to a four-year campus, or completing a certificate within a given amount of time (note the product-oriented nature of each item)—exclude those 76 percent of students. Often, those students do not follow the persistence pipeline to transfer or certificate. Can these 76 percent of students manage to persist without a strong relationship with faculty and staff? We know they often do.

Rhetorically, students are the audience for the survey, which is based on the premise that "When entering students perceive clear, high expectations from college staff and faculty, they are more likely to understand what it takes to be successful and adopt behaviors that lead to achievement" (CCSSE). As I alluded to earlier, (SENSE) is delivered to students of community colleges during the first few weeks of the quarter and hinges on a tacit understanding that "success" amounts to achievement, as evidenced from the mission statement quoted above. I suggest that this definition of "success" is a common, market-driven one that implies completion of a task, which could be viewed as contradictory to the cumulative knowledge building process of education. Reframing this notion may provide a more authentic vision of success.

The CCSSE's mission also involves helping community colleges assess their students and faculty—measuring them quantitatively so they can identify the obstacles to student achievement and use those numbers to validate federal and state funding for both institutions and initiatives. CCSSE sponsors or is connected to several "success"-based initiatives, such as the Starting Right Initiative for Student Success, the Entering Student Success Institute, and the MetLife Foundation Initiative on Student Success. At one participating community college system, Lone Star, CCSSE's work has prompted opening a new office with a well-intentioned, yet seemingly nonsensical name using the term "success": the SEA (Success Encourages Achievement) Center.

Interestingly, CCSSE acknowledges its role, and perhaps its ambition, to shape the rhetoric and practice of "success" through the work of the survey. CCSSE says, "CCSSE and NSSE share a strong interest in institutional improvement and a strong companion interest in influencing the definition and public understanding of 'quality' in collegiate education" (CCSSE). In what follows, I address the following questions about the survey: How does the

survey language construct education as a product or perhaps even a commodity to be purchased? How does this commodification of education create dangerous implications for writing courses like those in my open-access college (and maybe in yours) that are deemed "gatekeeper courses?"

Benchmarking Success

In what follows, I analyze direct questions from the SENSE survey and connect that language to how the narrative of success is perpetuated. SENSE asks students questions in six categories, or benchmarks. The survey questions do not always specifically inquire about "success," but most, if not all, of the questions refer in some way to faculty or staff's impact on student persistence and success. The survey asks students to agree on five-point Likert scale.

In the "Academic and Social Support Network" Benchmark of SENSE, three specific questions target students' social network and hold implications for how students regard social capital:

"At least one other student whom I didn't previously know learned my name."

"At least one instructor learned my name."

"I learned the name of at least one other student in most of my classes."

If the students did not feel part of the social fabric of the institution, or perhaps if they cared if they were or were not part of this fabric (without Bourdieu's social capital), one would expect a lower rate of response to these questions. The response rate was fairly high, though. For instance, 81 percent of students "agreed" or "strongly agreed" that another student learned his or her name; 86 percent of students "agreed/strongly agreed" that an instructor learned his or her name; and 85 percent of student responders learned the name of another student in his or her class. In the key findings summary, SENSE explains that, yes, "The majority of students respond positively to these survey items, reflecting the colleges' efforts to build support networks." SENSE continues in summative narrative by saying, "Still, there is evident room for improvement as institutions seek to ensure that all students get connected to the information, services and people that can contribute significantly to their success" (SENSE). Yet, would a stronger social network contribute to "success"? Over 80 percent of students report feeling connected, and yet half of all students do not persist to the second year. It seems that social capital could be less important than SENSE imagines.

In this way, perhaps the social capital aspect of persistence may be overestimated in the research and in SENSE. If students buy what the ads are selling, then they may not expect access to a social network. They expect "success" in the form of cultural capital (the degree), and they may not see belonging to social networks as a way to achieve that success. They expect their "success" to begin, as the ads say, when they take classes to obtain what they see

advertised on the billboard. In consumer terms, access to social capital might be a nice upgrade to the package, but it isn't in the base model product students have been sold.

> "education defies being defined as a product because it has so many spontaneous and unpredictable benefits"

However, education defies being defined as a product because it has so many spontaneous and unpredictable benefits. Using "success" and other market-driven terms to describe education creates the illusion of immutability. As Robert Haight contends in his article, "The Business Metaphor and Two-Year College Writing Instruction," the business metaphor so frequently used by business leaders, school administrators, politicians, and some educators themselves is attractive because it creates the illusion of certainty where there is uncertainty, sameness where there is difference, objectivity where there is subjectivity" (74). As Miller pointed out, the spaces of uncertainty and often discomfort can be the most active learning experiences.

The following statements from the survey directly refer to "success" in the High Expectations and Aspirations Benchmark of Effective Practice with Entering Students:

"The instructors at this college want me to succeed."

"I have the motivation to do what it takes to succeed in college."

"I am prepared academically to succeed in college."

By targeting students in the very earliest parts of their college experience, SENSE hopes to determine the biggest impacts on student persistence. The phrasing of question one, though, leads students to respond to a vague impression after a few weeks on campus rather than even one term's worth of relationship-building with faculty. For instance, at the point students take this survey, they may not have received feedback on an essay yet, which is one way writing teachers build rapport with students. Further, the question sets up an us/them dichotomy and undermines the very relationship that CCSSE deems elemental to student persistence. The question assumes that not everyone plays for the same "success" team here; instructors and students are not on the same side.

The results? Forty percent of students "strongly agreed" "that instructors at this college want me to succeed," and the majority simply "agreed" at 48 percent. According to these answers, 88 percent of entering students felt that instructors were not a roadblock to their success despite the fact that this question gave them a free pass to complain. They feel a part

of the social network, or at least they feel enough connection with their instructors to "succeed" in CCSSE's terms.

The next question about motivation garnered just as high scores. Ninety percent of students either agreed or strongly agreed that they had the "motivation to do what it takes to succeed in college," and 85.1 percent agreed or strongly agreed that they are "prepared academically to succeed in college." The majority of students view themselves as prepared, yet does that match faculty perceptions of newly entering students? Why do so many students see themselves as academically prepared and then do not persist?

In a recent 2008 presentation, Angela Oriano-Darnall, director of SENSE, echoed a statistic that reappears in literature across community college scholarship: "Community colleges typically lose half of their students prior to the second year." But 85 to 90 percent of students report they have the motivation and support to persist. It seems that most everyone except for the students themselves expects that they will not "succeed" in school. A more pressing question might be: Do students view themselves as learners who persist or as consumers who buy a product in this system? SENSE continues the advertisements' work of placing students in the customer position, as evidenced in the framing of the SENSE questions. For instance, consider the following three questions:

"A college staff member talked with me about my commitments outside of school (work, children, dependents, etc.) to help me figure out how many courses to take."

"An advisor helped me to select a course of study, program, or major."

The staff member, as the head of the noun phrase, does the work here—serving his or her customer. Imagine if the question were framed with the student at the head of the noun phrase: "I sought the help of a college staff member;" or "I spoke to an advisor." In these cases, the student would be positioned as the actor in the agree/disagree statements. As it stands, the SENSE survey linguistically constructs the student as the customer who receives the services. This construction just continues the pattern of student-consumer/institution-retailer. As consumers, they are certainly prepared to do the work—they've been practicing all their lives in a consumer-driven society. But once a student enters the pipeline, they discover their primary role is no longer that of a consumer but that of a learner, and they may be less prepared to assume that role in college than they imagine.

SENSE and the Writing Class

When SENSE asks students about writing and classroom work, it is generally about what their instructors do in the classroom. However, this is right in line with CCSSE's concern with the institutional practices that determine eventual "success" for students. The questions ask students to evaluate smaller-scale classroom practices, revealing SENSE's narrow conception of

assessment and understanding of what creates student "success." In the *Engaged Learning* Benchmark, students answer sixteen questions on a five-point, strongly agree/disagree Likert scale, including these three:

> "Prepare at least two drafts of a paper or assignment before turning it in."
>
> "Participate in supplemental instruction (extra class sessions with an instructor, tutor, or experienced student)."
>
> "Receive prompt written or oral feedback from instructors on your performance."

Each question starts with an active verb to denote a process in which the student takes part. The student is the actor in the first two processes, but in the third process they "receive" the feedback. Instructors often use the words "participate" and "prepare" on syllabi to establish expectations and grading systems for the quarter, so students may be familiar with these words. I suggest that these questions are assessment-driven questions that really ask students about the practices of their assessors. Outcomes of courses or meeting larger disciplinary goals are not addressed—just the steps taken to get to the larger outcomes. CCSSE believes these micro-scale practices to be crucial to attaining social capital and ultimately student "success"; therefore, they measure them on the survey. Yet, the general education outcomes many community colleges have adopted pertaining to citizenship, sound thinking, and applying theoretical information remain unaddressed. Gerald Graff, in his 2009 article "Why Assessment?" has persuasively argued for measuring such outcomes across disciplines. He contends that the mixed messages students receive about what constitutes good work between and within disciplines necessitates strong, outcome-based assessment. This kind of assessment can connect disciplines and create coherent courses of study for students. Without it, he argues that "the disconnect between courses ultimately reproduces itself in the disconnect between college undergraduates and academic culture itself. It also widens the gap between the high-achieving few and the majority" (159). But SENSE does not assess as Graff would because it assesses institutional practices instead of what students learn. Because SENSE questions are ultimately unrelated to what, if anything, students learn, students respond favorably. They do not identify these issues as impeding their "success" perhaps because they don't envision their ultimate "success" being achieved through those practices.

For instance, only 28 percent of students say they *never* prepared at least two drafts of a paper before handing it in. (CCSSE summarized the findings of this benchmark using the "never" category to report the findings.) Twenty-seven percent reported *never* receiving prompt written or oral feedback from their instructors, and 69 percent never participated in supplemental instruction. Of course, one notable observation here is that CCSSE frames the results negatively by not reporting the positive percentage, which is that 72 percent of students across the curriculum did write at least two drafts of a paper before handing it in.

CCSSE doesn't target only English classes, so the 72 percent of students who responded positively to the draft question could be writing in other disciplines, too.

However, because students responded favorably to the questions, does not mean the questions are well-conceived. The questions above are prime examples of the market-driven language of the CCSSE survey. It reinforces the student-as-customer model of education at the end of week three of students' first term. It asks them, essentially, "Are you happy enough with what you purchased so far to persist?" But students do not know if they have succeeded in the term yet, nor do they have any recourse if they are unhappy with their purchase (other than dropping the course). When the student is the customer in this fashion, the teacher becomes the equivalent of the sales clerk that negotiates a relationship between the customer, the institution, and the even more nebulous "real world."

And this model has far-reaching implications for English studies as composition continues to be a prerequisite in most community colleges. The customer-clerk model is based on standardizing teaching practices in order to achieve "success," not learning outcomes as outlined by disciplinary organizations like NCTE, CCC, or the WPA. It is assessment at its worst: assessment that does not gauge learning or teaching; assessment that does not ask for student reflection. Haight addresses as much when he argues that such forms of assessment are convenient for those outside of writing programs because they simplify the messiness of learning to write. "One reason the business customers, as well as politicians, have promoted this view of education might be that it offers the greatest amount of control to those who do not inhabit the classroom. The role of education is solely to serve future employers" (76).

The value of success in English is different than the value of success in business information systems, for instance. Scott Leonard explicates this concern in his article, "It's Not an Economy, Stupid! The Education-as-Product Metaphor," when he states, "The production-consumption metaphor has a powerful and persuasive logic: the academic industry produces commodities of value, to wit, college degrees. Different models of these commodities sell unequally on the market" (68). The model of English studies, particularly literature courses, has declining value as Marc Bousquet (2009) and Richard Miller (2009) demonstrate in their work on the health and future of English as a discipline. Yet the value of writing persists as oral and written communication continue to be pillars of general education and as students are expected to carry strong writing abilities into their classes beyond introductory composition and into their eventual careers.

Leonard argues that faculty can make change by resisting administrative decisions to increase class size and reduce course offerings. He speculates about the positive changes and solidarity with students that might result from a faculty strike on behalf of student tuition increases instead of faculty salary increases (76). And he finally argues that change in the

higher education system can happen when teachers focus on their students in the classroom and fight for their rights on campus. Then, Leonard says, students "will stand up for us when we ask for relief from the purblind pruning of the "cost-cutters" (77). What Leonard says here about students sounded familiar to me, but it took me a while to figure out why.

Last year at a department meeting, I listened to a department chair encourage faculty to tell students to complain about conditions on campus to higher-level administrators, not faculty or chairs. The sentiment was that the institution would go to great lengths to make their customers (students) happy—to encourage their "success." The complaints needed to come directly from the customers, though, in order to make an impact. Leonard's concept of student involvement follows the same sentiment, assuming that students fall on the side of the faculty. Leonard says that when faculty take student interests seriously, students will reciprocate and help to make favorable change on behalf of faculty. But why is it so difficult for faculty and their composition programs to work effectively to change the academic industry themselves? After all, most of the students at an institution move through introductory composition at some point.

Historically, the composition programs at community colleges have been in no position to create substantive change in the discipline of English studies or within the institutions in which they reside. Over-burdened with growing student enrollment and fewer and fewer full-time faculty, the English departments that house composition programs find themselves in the position of alternately defending their legitimacy as producers of writing "products" (students) while creating an ideological argument against the production of the same. So as colleges position entry-level composition courses as gatekeeper courses—courses whose passage or failure often determine the persistence of students, English faculty accept that burden in return for a secure position in the curriculum. At the same time, faculty resist the standardization of their curriculum that theoretically would result in a consistent output of writing products. This resistance stems from the belief that growth in writing is not measured best by a test at the end of the quarter; rather, writing development is best measured by tracing the small gains, as well as the large ones, that all emerging writers experience over time.

As Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson and Jeff Sommers argue in their 1999 essay, "Professing at the Fault Lines: Composition at Open Admissions Institutions," "Decisions about testing, course offerings, and bilingual education are being leveraged by ambitious political figures who use simplified arguments waged against the most vulnerable students in public education to shape opinion and garner support for their careers" (459). These decisions shape degree programs and course offerings, often limiting student and faculty choices in the interest of saving state money. In this regard, community college faculty may also have limited cultural capital in the community college and must become activists in order to preserve dis-

ciplinary interests, students' interests, and their own workloads. The pressure on writing faculty then increases, especially at two-year institutions where class sizes continue to rise based on epic enrollment.

Success as Recursive Practice

Even within such constraints, the power of language and conscious reflection should not be underestimated. Of course I want my students to "succeed" in my writing courses, but growing institutional constraints make it easy to forget to question the meaning of "success" and to bulldoze through the quarter pushing students along the academic pipeline. One of the problems with the notion of "success" when applied to the writing course is that the term "success" implies completion. But you don't complete learning how to write like you learn how to ride a bike, as my mentor used to say.

This notion of "success" as completion is a business-driven one, not a student-driven one or an education-driven one. The assumption by CCSSE and NSSE that students have the same definition of "success" implies a uniform demographic when community college students are the most diverse student population. It enables SENSE to construct questions about smaller communicative and managerial practices when the success of the democratic mission of the open-access college remains unexplored. For instance, SENSE assumes that increasing advising staff will increase student success and asks questions directly connected to that staff increase. Perhaps that equation is correct. I wonder, though, what it would mean for the success of the mission of my community college if SENSE asked students how, when, where, or if they participated as citizens in a college activity during the first three weeks of the quarter. Would that be viewed as a "successful" activity or an extraneous activity as the survey currently frames "success"?

Along these narrow lines, Rosenbaum et al. suggest limiting course offerings and bolstering "incentives" for students in order to increase "success." They suggest in *After Admissions* that a "rhetoric of exploration" (21) is not compatible with community college education. However, I argue (along with many in my field, I would guess) that a rhetoric of exploration is crucial to writing instruction. The most truly successful writing avails itself of all manner of exploration. In fact, even the most academic research paper explores. Writing successfully means inhabiting those spaces Richard Miller mentioned—those spaces in contention that need to be explored—the uncertain spaces. I want my students to succeed there most of all.

As writing teachers, we can foster language awareness in our courses. We can question and ask students to question how one fragment of language—success—acts as a false institutional construct. I suggest that we can work to create a more fluid notion of "success"

in our composition sequences *and* still value students' ability to enter the workforce. We are not serving students by remaining complicit in the market-driven language of success; in fact, positioning education and writing as a product damages the health of writing instruction because it negates the possibility for growth beyond the cultural capital students seek from the institution. And it reinforces a false impression of writing "success" in other disciplines which demand that composition courses churn out successful student writers. But writing teachers know learning to write happens over time. Often, the results are cumulative and do not appear until quarters or semesters later.

At one time, the idea of a recursive writing process was revolutionary. Consider how re-imagining a straight path to writing as a product changed how we conceive of teaching writing. By challenging the fixed notion of "success" in our writing courses, we can work to re-define it, as well. We can ask students to question what it is they value, what education means, and how their material conditions construct their lives. Asking students to re-examine what "success" means requires asking them to critically investigate their own language use and their membership in the myriad social and cultural networks surrounding education. My hope is for a recursive, student-led definition of success as a movement toward growth instead of a product. Perhaps higher education as a whole has adapted their language to the changing marketplace in order to communicate more effectively; however, as advocates for our students as human beings and for education as a process, we would better serve our students by positioning them as a makers and writers of their own narratives, not products of them.

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