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It’s Time to Bring Students Into the Conversation About Student Success

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For the past decade, Charlie and Kathy have led the Higher Education Data Sharing Consortium’s work with colleges and universities across the country to improve teaching and learning, student success, and inclusive excellence. They collaborate with faculty, staff, administrators, and students to find ways to gather, make sense of, and use evidence to improve the impact of courses, majors, programs, and institutions.
Imagine some point in the future, after you’re done with school and you’re leading a successful life. What does your life look like? What are you doing? How are you living? Please think big!

We started asking students this question about their vision for a successful life 2 years ago. Students helped us shape the question, and their answers have challenged and expanded our thinking about what students hope to get out of college.

Why did we start asking students how they define success? We have seen a growing emphasis on student success in our work with staff, faculty, and students at institutions across the country. And while we applaud this emphasis, we have also had a nagging feeling that something was missing from efforts to advance student success.

When leaders at colleges, universities, foundations, and policy organizations talk about student success, they talk about ensuring that more students from all backgrounds and identities stay in college, earn certificates and degrees on time and with minimal debt, and get good-paying jobs after college (Barnett & Kopko, n.d.; Coffey & Ajinkya, n.d.; EAB, n.d.; Pelletier, n.d.). These are critically important goals. But as we have reviewed articles and programs on student success, attended student success conference presentations and workshops, and worked on institutional student success projects, we have noted an absence of student voices on the matter.

How do students define success? Surely, they have many of the same goals as policy makers and institutional leaders, but maybe they are aiming for something more. Since students are our partners in higher education, we thought it was important to learn what they had to say.

This led us to start a new student success project for the Higher Education Data Sharing Consortium (HEDS) (see https://www.hedsconsortium.org), which we lead. HEDS is an organization of about 165 nonprofit colleges and universities that collaborate to advance undergraduate liberal arts education, inclusive excellence, and student success. We have two goals for the project: (a) to find out more about the ways that students think about their postcollege success, and (b) to use what we learn to shape the work of HEDS on student success.

Our first step was the most obvious—setting up conversations with students to talk about what they imagined to be a successful life after college. In fall 2019 and winter 2020, we spent a week at five HEDS institutions and talked with groups of students at each institution about their vision of success. In total, we spoke with 174 undergraduates. About a quarter of the students were in their first year at college, 40 percent were seniors, and the remaining students were split between sophomores or juniors. We did not ask students to give their identities
during the conversations, but based on their comments, we estimate that about 60 percent of the students identified as women, and 25 percent identified as students of color or international students. Depending on the institution, as many as one-third of the students described significant financial challenges to attending or continuing in college.

We asked students to both write and talk about the “Imagine some point in the future...” question we quoted at the beginning of this article. We also asked them other questions about their time in college, including experiences that were helping and hindering their success. Most of the students we spoke with seemed happy to talk and/or write about their vision of a successful life. Several students commented that they rarely had the chance to talk about their broader goals for life, and it was not uncommon for our conversations to go longer than the scheduled time.

### Student Success Focus Group Questions

1. Imagine some point in the future, after you’re done with school and you’re leading a successful life. What does your life look like? What are you doing? How are you living?
2. What experiences in college have most helped you move toward your vision of success?
3. What experiences in college have been obstacles?
4. What are your biggest worries or concerns as you think about what’s coming up in college and beyond?
5. Have you ever considered leaving your institution, either to go to another college or to take a break from college? If so, what led you to think about leaving? Why did you decide to stay?
6. What are the most important skills you’ve developed in college?

Unfortunately, COVID-19 forced us to cancel the remaining visits we had planned for spring 2020 and the following academic year. However, because our conversations with students had been so powerful, and because we thought engaging students in a conversation about their vision of success might help institutions connect with their students during a pandemic, we created two new surveys that include the open-ended “Imagine some point in the future...” question. One survey, the HEDS New Student Survey, is aimed at students who are just beginning college. The second survey, the HEDS Returning Student Survey, is for students who are returning for their second, third, or fourth year of college. (See the Appendix for sample questions from these surveys.) Both surveys give students the option of sending their responses to someone at their institution for a follow-up conversation about their goals for college and life.

About 4,300 undergraduates at 11 institutions completed one of these surveys in fall 2020. The demographics of the students who took these surveys were about the same as those of the students with whom we spoke during our five campus visits. Roughly 90 percent of these students responded to the open-ended question about their vision of a successful life and about one-third of them took advantage of the option to forward their responses to people at their institution for a conversation. Thematically, students’ comments on the survey were identical to those we heard in the face-to-face conversations.

### Students’ Visions of Success

Across both our face-to-face conversations and surveys, students’ ideas about a successful life focused on a combination of meaningful work, financial security, fulfilling relationships, and balance.

### Students’ Comments About a Successful Life

- “It is a Saturday morning around 9 a.m. and I am awake not because of class, but because I am. I’m living in a 2-bedroom apartment outside of Boston. My loans are all paid off. I have two beautiful rescue dogs. I open my laptop and self-schedule my month. I also have no loans and work in a pediatric ward or adult ICU [Intensive Care Unit] at [name deleted] Hospital. I travel and am able to financially support myself.”
- “I have a ‘career’ doing something I thoroughly enjoy. I have a family and live in a house with enough space and a garage and a man cave. I have a plethora of options and opportunities. Not in debt. Choice. Financially independent. Emotionally and mentally stable. I can support and elevate those around me.”
• “I see myself, maybe wearing scrubs or having my hair in a bun. I see myself walking, as if I am someone important. I’m living in a big city, and I might have a job where I am connecting with multiple people. I also see myself coming home and realizing that I am about to start my family. I see a diverse neighborhood and I also see that my job brings in money. I see myself in scrubs.”

• “My ultimate goal in the future is to live a happy and healthy personal life and have a successful professional life. I do not want to live in regrets so I want to follow a career path that I am passionate about and be good at it, even grow better and deeper in the field I choose. I want an independent, successful and happy life:) Because of that, I don’t see myself settling for a man, I don’t want to be dependent on anyone, I want to be able to fully support myself and my parents. Having a partner is cool or whatever, but if they are not supportive for me, I don’t need one.”

• “My life is meaningful and I am comfortable in my environment. I am doing something I love with people who I respect and enjoy working with and who feel the same way about me. I am living somewhere not too far away from my family and friends, either in a city or the suburbs and I have a great job that allows me to have some flexibility and I have opportunities to travel often and live in new places and experience different cultures.”

• “As a child you have a certain dream, mine was to be a lawyer. Now I am still interested but not so sure if it is still a passion of mine. We also have our dream reality, mine is to be involved in fashion whether it is creating my own business or clothing line. When thinking about my future I just want to come back to California and find a healthy job that can support my family and I for when that time comes. I personally do not want to have kids early because I want to enjoy my youth years doing things that bring joy and happiness to my life. Eventually, I have plans of settling down and not have to worry about expenses and devote time to balance my life between my passion job and being a mom.”

Although students talked about the importance of meaningful work, they were often vague about the professions, jobs, or careers they wanted to pursue. Rather, many emphasized the kind of lives their jobs would support. Good careers would be intrinsically meaningful and “something that I would love to do and am happy waking up in the morning knowing I get to go to work.” Sometimes students talked about being teachers, doctors, social workers, business executives, or another specific role, but regardless of whether they identified the kind of work they wanted to do, many students wanted their work to have a positive impact on the world, allowing them to “make a difference,” engage in “supporting their communities,” or “help others around them.”

In addition to providing fulfillment and meaning, students also wanted jobs that paid well. But there were two ways that students framed well-paid work. A small number of students talked about wanting to “make a lot of money,” become “exorbitantly wealthy,” or have an “extremely high quality of life—top 1%.” But most framed the income they desired in terms of whether it would allow them to live comfortably, debt free, and without “stressing about money.”

Students’ Comments About Finances

• “I hope that I will live happily and comfortably, without having to worry too much about paying off huge debt. I want to be financially secure enough that I can pay for necessary expenses, invest into my savings and future, and be able to donate money too.”

• “My job pays well. I can afford housing, food, travel, and personal expenses without much stress. Financial stability and independence are important to me. I want to be able to live without struggling.”

• “I’m not struggling financially and I’m able to live on my own, pay my bills, have food for myself without worrying about if I have enough money or not. I’m not worried or stressed out if I haven’t had enough to pay those bills.”

• “I would have a salary that enables me to take care of myself and my family and to donate to important causes.”

• “I have a good paying job. I am not living paycheck to paycheck.”

• “I have a stable job where I can support my family and myself.”
• “I have stable finances. My income covers my bills… I have limited debt—my credit card and school loans will hopefully be gone. I have good health insurance.”
• “I don’t want to be living check-to-check as it seems to have been for most of my life, and I’m hopeful that my education at [institution name removed] will help me stay on track to avoid that.”

A number of students also talked about benefits, including the importance of getting jobs with health insurance, paid sick leave, and paid vacations. Many of these students seemed to be responding to the experiences of family members and friends who had either lost benefits or never had them in their jobs to begin with.

Student loan debt hovered over many of our conversations about finances, and more broadly, the prospect of living a good life. One student described student loans as the “chains they would have after college.” Students talked openly, and anxiously, about how much money they were borrowing to attend college. Those who needed graduate degrees to practice in their intended professions spoke in great detail about the additional debt they would take on to complete their graduate education. For many students, a good life after college meant “not having to worry about paying off student loans,” “being debt free,” or at the very least, “I’m still paying my student loans, but financially able to do so.”

Students were aware that the more they borrowed, the more pressure they would feel to take jobs, meaningful or otherwise, just to pay the bills. And they worried about getting trapped in those jobs. These worries were often based on experience. Students talked about conversations with their parents or with people at their jobs or internships who had “temporarily” taken jobs they did not like to pay the bills, only to never leave. Students called this “settling.”

Students’ Comments About Getting Trapped in Undesirable Jobs
• “Both my parents hate their jobs. My mom codes all day. She hates the job, but it’s secure. Her passion is photography, but it’s not secure. She loves it but can only do it in her free time. My dad works at my mom’s company too. He loved his old job but hated his boss. … He had to resign from that job and take a position as a manager in the mail room. He hates his job now. I saw my parents come home stressed and hating their jobs. I don’t want to do that.”
• “I want to enjoy going to work every day even though I don’t know what I want to do. I know some people dread going to work, and I don’t want to do that.”
• “I worked in an auto shop over the summer, and there were people in the shop who were there every second of their lives, trying to make enough money to live. I don’t want to do that.”
• “I worked at a fast-food restaurant for a year. One of my co-workers was a single mom with three kids and health issues. I saw that and I thought, ‘I could be here my whole life.’”
• “I saw my athletic trainer in high school. She had kids but never saw them or her husband. She used to say we were her kids because she was with us six days a week. She was so stressed. I don’t want that.”

In addition to making enough money so that they could pay off their loans and live without financial stress, many students wanted jobs that gave them time for life outside of work or the ability to live near their extended family. Students’ ideas about the importance of relationships were intertwined with the kinds of jobs they wanted. Overall, students wanted balance: jobs that paid enough to allow them both the time and financial resources necessary to be with family and pursue meaningful activities outside of work.

Students’ Comments About Leading a Balanced Life
• “Ideally, I haven’t sold myself to work. I am able to enjoy life and have time for activities outside of work.”
• “Whether I am working or not, I am still leading a life where I am involved in my community, and more importantly my family. I think that the most important part of my successful life would be having meaningful and healthy relationships.”
• “I want to have an apartment/home in an area that I love and have friendships and relationships with people who help me to grow into a better person while also loving me as I am.”
• “I hope to live a life where I am comfortable enough in my work and career to where I can enjoy the important things in life (family and spending time with the people I love).”
“I will have a happy marriage and family, focusing on showing our kids the beautiful and valuable things about life.”

“I want to live in the city with my family who I would love most. My parents and brother would also live near me so we maintain a strong and close relationship.”

“I have a comfortable work–life balance so I can spend time with loved ones and practice hobbies.”

Finally, in addition to the themes we highlighted above, some students added that a successful life was one in which they more fully expressed their identities and capabilities.

Students’ Comments About Success and Their Identity

• “I have come out to all the significant people in my life.”

• “Life looks more peaceful, I will have a secure career and be fully transitioned to my identified gender.”

• “I see myself feeling proud of myself, not just for being the first to go to college but to also show my family and my race that we can do this, that anyone can if you put your mind to it. I see myself having a stable job that is well financially and one that I enjoy. I see myself hopefully doing something that I am passionate about, and although I don’t know what I want to do now, that doesn’t mean I won’t in the future.”

Next Steps

When we began this project, we had no idea whether students would find the chance to describe their vision of a successful life engaging. It turns out that they do. During our face-to-face conversations, a number of students told us that they enjoyed the chance to discuss these issues, and some of them added that they had rarely done so while they were in college.

As we write this article, thousands of students at 37 institutions across the country are taking one of the two HEDS surveys we described earlier and answering the “Imagine some point in the future…” question. We are sending their responses to advisors and other faculty and staff at their institutions so they can have a conversation about their vision of success and the college experiences that are helping them move toward that vision. Beyond helping students consider and refine their vision of, and actions toward, a successful life, we want mentors and institutional leaders to listen to what students say and consider how much their institution supports the hopes and aspirations of their students.

So far, the feedback from institutions about the value of these conversations for both students and mentors has been positive. But we need to learn more about where and when these conversations are most effective and how to help institutions build on them. We have also restarted our visits to institutions to continue our conversations with students about success. Although we have heard from students with diverse identities and backgrounds, to this point they have all come from small to medium-sized, 4-year private institutions. We will expand our visits to include a wider range of institutions.

Listening to students talk about their vision of success has had a profound impact on us. First, so many of the students with whom we have spoken, or whose responses we have read, have a desire to do good work, support their communities, and find loving relationships that it has lifted our spirits about the future. It’s in good hands.

Second, students have taught us that we may have been too “college-centric” in our thinking about the role of college. We often hear that a college education should help students find their passion, which, from a college’s perspective, means helping students find a major, profession, or career track that excites and engages them. In essence, college holds the key to students’ calling, and that key fits a lock somewhere in the many programs and opportunities that our institutions offer.

But perhaps this way of thinking shows a little arrogance on our part. It assumes that we are the source of things that students have the opportunity to become passionate about. If we have heard students correctly, many of them, even first-year students, have already found their passion: meaningful work, loving relationships, balanced lives, and the chance to make the world a better place. And for them, higher education is the means by which they can move toward those ends.

Since students are our partners in their education, maybe our job is to listen to, and be of service to, their callings. Are we listening carefully enough? Maybe we are being college- rather than student-centric when we say that higher education will help students find their passion. Maybe our job is to understand students’ passions, take them seriously, and help them develop the tools they need to flesh out, refine, and take meaningful steps toward the successful lives they seek.
Sample Questions From the HEDS New Student Survey

People go to college to achieve many different goals. In order for you to feel like you've had a successful college experience, which of the following must happen by the time you graduate from [Institution Name]? (Check all that apply)

- I'm prepared to begin a meaningful career.
- I've learned new things that will help me in my life after college.
- I feel prepared to deal with intellectual and interpersonal challenges that will come my way.
- I've built friendships that will last long beyond college.
- I've figured out what I want to do with my life.
- I feel confident that I will be able to financially support myself in the future.
- I feel prepared to build a good life for my family.
- I've made my family proud.
- I'm in a position to give back to my community.
- I've been accepted to a graduate school program (e.g., law school, medical school, business school).
- I'm better prepared to make a positive impact on the world.
- Other: __________

How often do you worry about the following? (Very often; Often; Sometimes; Never)

- Doing well academically in college
- Making friends
- Paying bills (tuition, books, etc.)
- Meeting the expectations of others
- Balancing class, social, family, and other life responsibilities
- Maintaining my mental health and well-being
- Figuring out what I want to do with my life
- National/global issues that impact society at large (e.g., climate change, the political environment, social inequality, COVID-19)
- Having enough to eat day-to-day
- Having a safe and secure place to sleep every night

Sample Questions From the HEDS Returning Student Survey

For you, what are the most important reasons to stay in college and complete your degree? (Check all that apply)

- To get a job that provides financial security
- To get a job that helps me start a meaningful career
- To learn new things and expand my horizons
- To become a more thoughtful and better-informed citizen
- To make life-long friendships
- To prepare for postgraduate education
- To make my family proud
- To build a good life for my children and/or family
- To improve my ability to give back to my community
- To be better prepared to make a positive impact on the world
- Other: __________

How often do you worry about the following? (Very often; Often; Sometimes; Never)

- Doing well academically in college
- Financial concerns (e.g., finding ways to pay for college, questions about my financial aid or on-campus jobs)
- Thinking about what I'm going to do immediately after college (employment, graduate school, etc.)
- Getting the right courses, internships, and experiences in college to set me up for my career
- Getting into the graduate school I need to build my career
- Paying off my student loans after college
- Finding a job that's meaningful
- Finding a job that gives me the resources I need to be comfortable
- Settling for a job I don't enjoy because it pays the bills
- National/global issues that impact society at large (e.g., climate change, the political environment, social inequality, COVID-19)
- Maintaining my mental health and well-being
- Creating balance between work, family, friends, and my personal interests/hobbies
• Knowing how to do “life stuff” (e.g., managing my finances, finding a good place to live, getting the right kinds of insurance)

Both surveys include the following open-ended questions:
• Imagine some point in the future, after you’re done with school and you’re leading a successful life. What does your life look like? What are you doing? How are you living? Don’t be afraid to think big!

For more information about these surveys see:
• HEDS New Student Survey: https://www.hedssconsortium.org/heds-new-student-survey/
• HEDS Returning Student Survey: https://www.hedssconsortium.org/heds-returning-student-survey/

References


