

Chapter 3

Conceptualizing Success: A Holistic View of a Successful First- Year Undergraduate Experience

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ABSTRACT

Student success continues to be an important topic in the higher education literature as students often struggle with university transition. Success is typically measured through the lens of retention or grades. However, retention in particular may not always be the best indicator, especially in universities with minimal drop-out rates. The present study was conducted in a Hong Kong government-funded university and seeks to understand first-year students' perspectives on what constitutes success. Three focus groups with 31 first-year students explored this topic. This study presents a new conceptualization of first-year success, positioning it as a holistic concept that encompasses overlapping domains of social, personal, and academic success. The findings extend the common focus on retention and grades in the student success literature and show that success is influenced by multiple aspects of student encounters in their first-year life. Implications for policy and practice are also identified.

INTRODUCTION

The transition from high school to university can put significant demands on many first-year undergraduate students: in particular they need to develop new learning skills which can differ substantially from their secondary school education. This transition to a new way of learning is often problematic (Briggs, Clark, & Hall, 2012; Foy & Keane, 2018). Many first-year students struggle with academic demands, workload, independent learning, time-management, lack of motivation and ineffective study skills (Aruquete, 2017; Yorke, 2004). At the same time, emotional distress such as anxiety, uncertainty and isolation

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can also affect the transition, influencing students' habits, beliefs and behaviors (Webster & Yang, 2012). Nevertheless, the on-going process of adjusting to the academic, social and personal demands of higher education offers students opportunities for growth and development and helps students to develop a sense of identity and belonging to the university (Briggs, Clark & Hall, 2012; Pedler, Willis & Nieuwoudt, 2022). Successful transition, where students adjust well to university life, is particularly important at the commencement of higher education study in the students' first year. Research indicates that a positive university transition is associated with academic success, social development and personal growth that can shape students' future success and well-being (Bailey & Phillips, 2016; Credé, & Niehorster, 2012; Menzies & Baron, 2014). Successful university transition is typically associated with student retention and persistence (Davidson & Wilson, 2013; Kelly et al., 2007), which higher education institutions often use in defining student success (Jamelske, 2009; Stewart, Lim, & Kim, 2015). Measures beyond these common indicators of retention and persistence tend to be less well-defined. Although some studies have associated success with student learning and engagement, many have focused on quality measurement rather than seeking conceptual understanding of success, or recognizing means to achieve student success (Chang, 2015; Jinghuan et al., 2014; Lin et al., 2018; Yamada, 2016; Yin, 2018; Zhang et al., 2015; Zhu & Arnold, 2013).

The challenge of understanding student success sits within the context of a battle for “world class excellence” in higher education: related measures are part of the race for global ranking or league tables of higher education institutions (Tapper & Filippakou, 2009). Although there are many debates on the use of league tables and criteria used to develop them, league tables have been one of the top factors influencing students' choice of university (Briggs, 2006; Matzdorf & Greenwood, 2015). Higher-ranked universities are often perceived to be more prestigious and successful, and attract more applications (Abbott & Leslie, 2004; Chevalier & Jia, 2016). League tables, then, play a significant role in shaping students' perceptions of success in higher education – particularly on entry and in developing expectations of what university studies will (or should) entail.

As first year university studies lay a foundation for progression through university and beyond (Barefoot, 2000; Harvey, Drew, & Smith, 2006), it is important to conceptualize student success for first year undergraduate students and understand what constitutes a successful transition. This chapter explores the meaning of student success in the first year of undergraduate study and how it is related to different aspects of university experience.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Transition into university poses many challenges to first-year students across academic, social and personal settings. Schlossberg et al. (1995) conceptualized the transition process as moving in (initially confronted with a transition), moving through (the day-to-day management of the transition), and moving out (leaving behind the known context). It is an on-going process of constructing meaning by the individual, and that “results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles”. Griebel & Niesel (2009) focused on the type of changes that happen in transition, including individual (e.g., change in self-esteem, confidence), relational (e.g., change in relationships with peers and/or teachers), and contextual (e.g., change in different learning environments) changes, while Schlossberg (2008) considered how the individual copes with challenges and proposed a 4S System (Situations, Support, Self, Strategies) to frame the transition experience. This system helps to articulate the situations and challenges faced by

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