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Reimagining Student Success: Equity-Oriented Responses to Traditional Notions of Success

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Abstract

This study examined how 20 faculty and staff members used a one-time funding initiative to (re)conceptualize and design student success interventions. We found that they selectively adopted traditional notions of student success but also elevated themes of social justice, civic engagement, and overall student well-being as valuable dimensions of student success. This more expansive conception of student success informed how project leads designed interventions, including peer-tutoring supports and programs to support a sense of belonging. We argue that participatory approaches to student success framing and programming might advance more relevant and responsive conceptions of student success and facilitate organizational processes for achieving these more expansive aims.

Since the 1980s colleges and universities have devoted significant resources toward improving student success in higher education (Ewell, 2009). Leaders in industry, research, and policy-

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making circles often define student success using metrics such as grades, year-to-year reten-tion, time-to-degree, graduation rates, and post-graduate salaries (Dorius, Tandberg, & Cram, 2017; Hurtado, Alvarez, Guillermo-Wann, Cuellar, & Arellano, 2012; Kinzie, 2012; U.S. Department of Education, 2015; Wood & Breyer, 2017). Attention to these student success outcomes has catalyzed an array of equity-oriented initiatives aimed at closing disparities between "traditional" and "historically underserved" students, including students of color; first-generation college students; students from low-income backgrounds; and nontraditional students such as veterans, student-parents, transfer students, and students from foster youth backgrounds (Chen, 2014; Engle & Tinto, 2008; Gonclaves & Trunk, 2014; Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2011).

Although few oppose efforts to improve student success for historically underserved and nontraditional students, prevailing conceptions of success may not be exhaustive of the ways that the faculty, staff, and students define success. In a moment of intensifying accountability, easily quantifiable metrics too frequently take precedence in shaping what counts as student success (Huisman & Mampaey, 2018). College rankings, such as the *U.S. News & World Report*'s annual "Best Colleges" rankings and *PayScale*'s comparative measures of college graduates' earning potential, participate in this broader shift toward quantifying student success (Dorius, Tandberg, & Cram, 2017; Yudkevich, Altbach, & Rumbley, 2015). State policy and state and federal funding streams are also important drivers of student success debates, particularly for public institutions of higher education (McKeown-Moak, 2013). In addition, regional accreditors, private vendors, and software providers participate in legitimat-ing particular conceptions of student success that tend to align with easily quantifiable outcomes (Ewell, 2009; Jaschik, 2007; Yudkevich, Altbach, & Rumbley, 2015).

These external pressures collectively contribute to a competitive global "rankings game" (Brankovic, 2018, p. 698), which pressures institutions of higher education to maintain vigilant attention to their institutional standing relative to competing colleges and universities (Ishikawa, 2012; Schuh & Gansemer-Topf, 2010). At times, such pressures may even encour-age administrators to adopt programs and structures of more prestigious universities rather than respond to the distinctive needs of their student populations (Morphew, 2009). Taken together, prevailing conceptions of student success reflect a variety of interests that may not actually reflect the expressed needs, hopes, or aspirations of students attending institutions of higher education and/or the faculty and staff who aim to serve them.

Ironically, these narrow conceptions of student success have emerged at a time when historically underserved students have begun to gain increased access to higher education opportunities. The percentage of freshmen students of color at four-year nonprofit institutions increased from 10% in 1971 to 43% of their first-year classes in 2015, a trend driven largely by Latinx and Asian students (Eagan et al., 2016). In response to these demographic shifts, higher education researchers have explored broader and more culturally relevant conceptions of student success (Garcia & Okhidoi, 2015; Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2011; Leach & Zepke, 2010; Rendón, 2006; Schreiner, 2010). These scholars have introduced definitions of student success that belie easy quantification. To cite one example, Kuh and colleagues (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2011) defined student success as, "academic achievement; engagement in educationally purposeful activities; ssatisfaction; acquisition of desired knowledge, skills, and competencies; persistence; and attainment of educational objectives" (p. 10). Although these conceptions of student success capture a broader range of students' experiences and aspirations, further research is needed to specify what success means for historically underserved and nontraditional students. Such findings can

inform how faculty and staff members might design interventions that better support students' educational and social futures.

The Study

Purpose

The study relies on interviews conducted with staff and faculty members who worked directly with historically underserved and nontraditional students in order to discern their ideas about student success. Our goal was to elevate the conceptual and experiential knowledge of the faculty and staff and to explore how their sense of students' needs might inform debates about student success broadly. Interviews concentrated on the ways that faculty and staff at one public four-year university conceptualized student success amid shifting institutional, organizational, and demographic contexts.

Context and Procedures

In 2016 the California State Legislature (SB 1050) provided funds to each of the nine Universities of California (UC) in order to (1) increase the enrollment of undergraduate students from low-income or underrepresented backgrounds and (2) improve undergraduate student outcomes particularly for low-income and first-generation students as well as other students labeled as at greater "risk" of lower graduation rates (Brown, 2016). This call solicited projects that would reduce time-to-degree and increase student graduation rates in alignment with UC-wide accountability metrics (Regents of the University of California, n.d.).

We conducted this study at one UC campus, the University of California, Santa Cruz (UCSC). UCSC is a federally designated Hispanic Serving Institution. In the 2016–17 school year, the campus population included nearly 17,000 undergraduates and 1800 graduate students. Since 2000 the share of Latinx students has more than doubled and now comprises 30% of the overall student population. Nearly half of undergraduates (42%) are the first in their families to attend college; and more than a third (38%) are eligible for the Educational Opportunities Program (EOP), which serves students who are low-income, first-generation, from under-resourced high schools, undocumented, without family support, and/or current or former military members.

The state legislature allocated $1.559 million to UCSC in one-time student success funds to spend during the 2016–17 school year, which was disbursed through a campus-led, peer-reviewed request for proposals process. The UCSC Division of Student Success, which oversaw the disbursement process, received 38 proposals and selected 24 projects to fund, including one that supported research and assessment for the remaining 23. The review committee selected proposals that specifically addressed the needs of low-income, first-generation, and underrepresented minority students, while also considering a project's potential for scale and its ability to meet a rigid time frame. Some proposals employed new evidence-based practices that had not yet been implemented on campus, and other projects proposed novel interventions to achieve more expansive conceptions of student success.

We used this infusion of funding as an opportunity to examine how faculty and staff conceived of student success and the ways they built differing conceptions of success into their campus projects. The projects addressed a variety of issues associated with student success (see Table 1), ranging from "light touch" mailings or phone calls to prospective students to

more intensive services aimed at supporting historically underserved students. Five projects focused specifically on *recruitment, admissions, and enrollment* of high school students in schools that served a majority of underrepresented students. Another six projects focused on improving *climate and belonging* on campus, including four that provided programs and advising for students of color and other underrepresented students; and two focused on student experiences and engaged historically excluded voices in dialogue about student experiences on campus. The largest group of projects focused on *course-based interventions and academic support*, which entailed the development of new courses with different pedagogical approaches (four projects) and expanded or initiated course support services for underrepresented students (four projects). The final group of projects included *faculty and staff planning and professional development*, with two projects providing direct professional development for faculty members to implement new pedagogical approaches in specific courses and two others developing resources to help train staff, such as advisors, to better support historically underserved and nontraditional students.

The study we report here did not explore the efficacy of each of the 23 projects; a more formal evaluation was conducted and reported to the state legislature at the conclusion of the funding year (University of California, Santa Cruz, 2017). The evaluation found that the funds were used to serve the intended populations and that short-term outcomes aligned with campus goals for reducing equity gaps in enrollment and retention.

Data Collection

Data included in-depth interviews with the leaders of the projects, whom we termed "project leads," that were conducted at the end of the school year when the projects were nearing the end of their funding cycle. Interviews allowed us to understand conceptions of student success from the perspectives of the faculty and staff members engaged in the day-to-day work of implementing these interventions (Creswell, 2009). Five interviewers, all of whom were doctoral students, asked project leads about their understanding of student success, their implementation of these conceptions, the opportunities and challenges they encountered, and their aspirations for university-wide change. Interviewers used a common protocol to ensure similar data collection, but also invited respondents to share additional insights they felt were important. We also reviewed documents prepared by project staff (e.g., proposal, theory of change).

The study was approved as exempt from human subjects review by the UCSC Institutional Review Board. We offered confidentiality to all interviewees in an effort to elicit their honest reflections of student success efforts at the University. In this article we therefore use pseudonyms and mask the details of the specific projects in the analysis and reporting. Throughout this article we refer to projects within the typology described in Table 1.

Of the 23 project leads, 11 were faculty members and/or faculty administrators; and 12 were staff members. Sixteen leads identified as female, and 7 identified as male; 10 were persons of color (African American or Black, Latinx, or Asian/Pacific Islander); and the remaining 13 were White. Although we analyzed all projects, we avoided directly citing three interviews per the requests of interviewees. We audio recorded all interviews and transcribed them for analysis.

Data Analysis

Applying a transformative paradigm (Mertens, 2015), we used the 23 funded projects to explore how project leads considered the complex social realities and experiences of

Table 1 Project descriptions

Recruitment, admissions, and enrollment	
Educational partnership center	Launched the Educational Access Program to increase college application and enrollment rates of low-income first-generation underrepresented students
High school ethics bowl	Expansion of regional debate program focused on contemporary ethical issues to schools serving low-income and underrepresented students
Conducting targeted yield activities	Personalized mailing to student prospects and their families with the goal of increasing newly enrolled first-year students from schools serving low-income and underrepresented students
Family participation in orientation	Minimize the number of incoming students who change their minds over the summer by paying for low-income, first-generation student and family expenses to attend orientation
College freshmen post-admission calling	Outreach to incoming students to provide information about resources and their transition to college with current UCSC students as ambassadors
Climate and belonging	
Men of color	Serve men of color and specifically Black men through wrap-around services focused on academic success and sense of belonging using an asset-based approach
Improving the cultural transition to UCSC	Interactive conversations with first-year, first-generation students to discuss the cultural and psychological consequences of transitioning to college
Black academy	Host a six-day summer orientation for African/Black/Caribbean incoming first-year and transfer students to support their academic success
Diversity and inclusion through theater	Creation of two new theater productions addressing the current climate and heightened racial tensions experienced by students of color
Student success stories	Creation of a story archive of first-year students about their formative experiences in their first year of college
Smith renaissance student success	Expand advising services for current or former foster youth and students who are homeless, wards of the court, or others who do not have a traditional family safety net
Course-based and academic support	
STEM success class	Expanding problem-solving skills for students who are underprepared in STEM
First-year experience-based physics	Create a research-based course for incoming students with mentoring by existing faculty members, graduate students, and post-docs to support students in a research project
Community-engaged Research practicum	Support students in a sociology course to conduct community-engaged research, including data collection, analysis, and reporting
Learning support services	Expand supplemental instruction and tutoring, extend existing STEM programs, implement EOP mentoring program, support for students for writing requirement
Academic excellence Program	Expand programming for EOP and underrepresented STEM students through course support and collaborative learning environments
Engineering transfer student success	Increase academic and support services for transfer students in Engineering, including peer mentoring, tutoring, textbook lending library, and connection with faculty
Spanish writing center	Establish a Spanish writing center for upper division students in Spanish Studies
Core grammar for college	Online course support for students who are required to take a first-year writing course focused on grammar and punctuation

Table 1 (continued)

Recruitment, admissions, and enrollment	
Staff and faculty planning and professional development	
College 1 Professional development	Practical workshop for lecturers teaching a new introductory course for incoming students offered university-wide through the colleges
Pedagogical training for writing outcomes	Pedagogical training for faculty who teach two introductory writing courses
Math placement and preparation	Develop a math placement concierge to provide information about the math placement process and first-year math courses for incoming students
Certificate program in advising	Develop a certificate program for academic advisors to increase the level and relevance of advising for a diverse student population

historically underserved students in their ideas about student success. We coded data and conducted analyses with *NVivo* software in iterative phases using a "two-level scheme" (Miles & Huberman, 1994), searching first for patterns and themes that emerged within each project and then exploring themes across projects (Schwandt 2007). Following Patton (1990), we conducted a first round of coding that utilized an inductive approach. During this initial stage, we constructed broad thematic codes based on what project leads deemed most important, such as (1) the environmental context, including the institutional character of UCSC and the students it serves; (2) visions of student success from the perspective of project leads and their aspirations for the university; and (3) challenges of sustaining their interventions in an under-resourced public university. Using writing as a process of inquiry (Richardson, 1994), we wrote seven analytic memos and collapsed overlapping categories. In the following section we discuss the themes that emerged as most important for interviewees regarding the (in)adequacies of existing student success measures, contrasting definitions about what success might entail, and their ideas about more socio-culturally relevant and student-driven approaches to program development that the University might employ. We believe that these findings outline potentially promising pathways for advancing more equitable and culturally responsive approaches to student success.

Findings

Project leads recognized the student success metrics that were used for accountability purposes within the university and multi-campus university system; but they also contested these standardized views of student success, openly challenged these metrics, and even contributed contrasting definitions about what success might entail for the students they served. They drew on their everyday work with historically underserved and nontraditional students to infuse prevailing notions of student success with contrasting civically-engaged and justice-oriented values.

Contesting Traditional Conceptions of Student Success

Interviewees expressed concerns that traditional notions of student success did not adequately represent the range of different meanings success might encompass. In some cases they felt

that prevailing notions of success were even inappropriate measures for historically under-served and nontraditional students.

Contesting Student Success Metrics About half of the project leads critiqued traditional notions of student success, particularly the metric time-to-degree. Many scholars regard time-to-degree, "the time between initial enrollment in a postsecondary institution and graduation with a college degree" (Shapiro et al., 2016, p. 3), as a measure of cost-savings designed to enhance institutional efficiency (Carnevale & Strohl, 2010; McCormack, Schnee, & Vanora, 2014). Other researchers view time-to-degree as a way to orient institutional action toward removing barriers to graduation, especially for historically underserved students (Attewell & Monaghan, 2016; Shapiro et al., 2016). For project leads time-to-degree competed with the realities of historically underserved students' lives, many of whom juggle multiple family and work obligations as they pursue a college degree.

Sandra (pseudonym), a project lead for a course-based and academic support project, described how her project aligned with university efforts to increase student GPA and graduation rates, but explained why she ignored time-to-degree.

> The idea of… students getting in and out in four years doesn't necessarily align well with students who will benefit from having time to develop their skills. So, to me, time to degree, I'm concerned… is negatively impacting, honestly, equity because I get concerned that students are being told that they need to get done as quickly as they should and[that] they need to get out of here.

Her project used course-based interventions and a collaborative tutoring program to support students' deeper learning of the course material rather than emphasizing a transactional "getting in and out" approach to learning. In addition to questioning time-to-degree, which conflates slowness with lack of progress and speed with mastery (Varenne & McDermott, 1999), Sandra also remarked that some students experience added stressors and internalize deficit messages when they are not able to meet normative time-to-degree timelines.

Yvonne, a lead on a faculty and staff planning and professional development project, similarly questioned the appropriateness of time-to-degree as a measure of success. She relayed an encounter she had with a transfer student, who opted to postpone graduation in order to deepen his research with a faculty member. She explained it as follows.

> And he had done some amazing work and was sitting there telling me that he wanted to stay another year so he could continue doing his research.... People always think that time-to-degree is about the students who can't make it to graduation, and it's not.

Yvonne used this example to demonstrate why time-to-degree is not universally indicative of success. For this particular student, finishing his research and forging a deeper connection with his faculty mentor better captured his understanding of success. Transfer students, who generally enter UCSC as juniors, comprised 23% of incoming students in fall 2017 (University of California Information Center, 2018). Yvonne elaborated that time-to-degree did not take into account how long it might take transfer students to connect with a faculty mentor and complete a research project, both of which are also important contributors to student success (Bangera & Brownell, 2014; Castillo & Estudillo, 2015).

Other project leads drew on interactions with students and families from historically underserved backgrounds to challenge traditional notions of success as an individual concept.

Elena, the lead for a recruitment, enrollment, and retention project, approached retention as a collective and family-based outcome rather than an individual one. Her discussion of campus visits for first-generation college students illustrates this point:

> We put some money into helping… the family members to attend orientation because that really sets students up for success. And if their family has an idea of what the campus is like and what the students are hearing, they're going to have more support rather than not knowing how to support them.

Elena situated retention within the social and cultural contexts of historically underserved students' lives, which are often deeply interwoven with family relationships (Chun & Evans, 2016). In doing so she selectively incorporated aspects of student success that included first-generation college students' family members—key sources of support in retention efforts. Her example builds on recent efforts to expand questions of resilience and retention beyond campus-specific interventions (Museus, Yi, & Saelua, 2017).

Collectively, project leads enacted what Binder (2007) theorized in her analysis of individuals as sense-making "bricoleurs" (p. 568). They drew on their tacit knowledge and interactions with historically underserved students as a basis for contesting and devising more responsive interventions for student success.

Reconceptualizing Student Success Project leads did not merely contest traditional student success metrics, they also proposed new vocabularies and frameworks for conceptualizing student success. Nearly half of them articulated distinctive visions of success that were not evident in existing policy guidelines or evaluation criteria, which emphasized an understanding of success that relied on graduation rates or future financial earnings (Dorius, Tandberg, & Cram, 2017). Instead, these interviewees drew on themes of justice, civic engagement, and social and emotional health to articulate their understanding of student success.

Anna, the lead for a recruitment, admissions, and enrollment intervention, described student success as cultivating "critical change agents." As a faculty member, she emphasized the importance of GPA and graduation, but described student success this way.

> I think that we need to think about developing critical change agents in our society. We need to think about people reflecting deeply on who they are, the work they're doing in the world, what they want to be doing in the world, what kind of mark they want to leave in the world, and, you know, the processes that they are involved in how to make that happen.

In her work with historically underrepresented students transitioning to college, Anna conceptualized success as a recursive relation between self and society, that is, as a process in which students develop new academic and social identities to shape, and not only be shaped by, social and economic opportunities beyond the university.

Similarly, Yan and Oliva, co-directors of a climate and belonging project, posited a more politicized and civically engaged notion of student success. Yan spoke of first year students' interests in "making a difference" and "making a positive impact in the world." He added, "Student success is about helping put that into something more direct and focused, maybe where you're helping to make good on that American project of all these different folks coming together to make a world." He argued that institutions have an opportunity to facilitate a more cooperative and collaborative conversation around student success. His statements

challenged entrepreneurial conceptions of student success, which tend to emphasize themes of competition and individual distinction (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2010).

Sandra similarly felt that the traditional metrics of student success were inadequate because they emphasized students' academic progress and not students' holistic health and the potential physical and emotional toll achieving academically might entail. She elaborated and asked, "Are we defining success accurately if our students are anxious wrecks when they leave? And they have a GPA and a job at the end, is that success? I don't know." Sandra went on to express concerns about whether mental health received adequate attention within existing debates about student success and added, "I'm just sort of perennially concerned that we might not be capturing everything that we need to capture when we think about success." Indeed, mental health issues in higher education are prevalent, particularly among students from low-income backgrounds (Lipson, Kern, Eisenberg, & Breland-Noble, 2018). Yet, as Sandra observed, mental health has not received adequate attention within scholarly and policy conversations concerning student success.

As a final example, Kendall, project lead for a climate and belonging intervention, focused specifically on students of color and introduced new notions of student success that linked personal health and resilience with community connection. Kendall explained:

> Students need to have something to connect to and to see their past in order to open up to their future… to open up to where they connect and have a sense of belonging indefinitely. And inside these times, in these turbulent times in America, it's good to see where you come from, who are your people, who are your community, who you need to support because things are very turbulent.

Kendall's narrative revealed how conceptions of student success were interwoven with broader sociopolitical contexts. For Kendall success was not about maximizing GPA scores or earning potential, but about developing a sense of self-confidence and self-worth in a world often hostile to people of color.

Together, these examples reveal how project leads selectively adopted and elaborated on dimensions of student success that they found lacking. Rather than unquestioningly implementing these solutions, interviewees created new meanings about student success that were rooted in their working theories of how best to support historically underserved and nontraditional students.

Developing Novel Organizational Structures

Paying attention to how faculty and staff conceptualized student success also informed our interest in the kinds of interventions and organizational structures project leads crafted to achieve these aims. We elaborate on three types of interventions that aimed to achieve these expansive notions of student success: adapting departmental and classroom structures using more culturally responsive approaches to teaching; instituting more participatory, student-driven approaches to program development; and attending to a sense of belonging on campus.

Adapting Departmental and Classroom Structures Longstanding conceptions of student success are embedded in normalized structures of university and college life (Zucker, 1987), such as the division of content by disciplines and fields or impersonal and hierarchical roles between faculty members and students within large lecture halls. Half of the leads sought to

adapt organizational roles, routines, and procedures in ways that extended their personal and professional sense of how best to support historically underserved students.

Helen, a faculty member and lead of a course-based and academic support intervention, designed a collaborative tutoring project for historically underrepresented STEM students. She challenged existing structures of teaching and learning that she regarded as impersonal and based on individual theories of change. She organized collaborative "learning ecologies" such as peer tutoring programs, which she insisted would situate STEM learning within learning environments that elevated cultural assets and ways of knowing among historically underserved students. Additionally, she critiqued the absence of university resources and supports that might allow faculty members to develop sustainable mentoring relationships with students. Helen added that personal mentoring relations "need to be built into those department evaluation metrics because then that would be considered valuable." For Helen, advancing student success required individual creativity and effort, but also department level valuations of these kinds of contrasting approaches to supporting student success.

Similarly, Eric, a faculty member and lead of a course-based and academic support project, implemented an intervention to support historically underserved students in the social sciences. In his perspective, large class sizes and 10-week academic quarters limited the depth of faculty and student interactions. To address this limitation, he designed course-based research activities that occurred in the community, where students could interact differently with each other and himself. Eric admitted:

> We're disconnected from students' lives in a way when they're in their classrooms. And I'm totally guilty of that before I did this project. And now, because I spend more time outside the classroom with my students, then I, you know, get a different kind of relationship with them. And I think it's been very positive.

In situating student learning within community contexts, Eric managed to adapt more traditional and transactional ways for faculty-student interaction in ways that afforded more authentic forms of engagement. He later attributed these new kinds of student-faculty relations as contributing to greater student engagement and student interest in coursework.

Centering Student-Driven Programming Project leads also sought to develop novel approaches to programming that were driven by and resonated with historically underserved and nontraditional students. About a third of project leads implemented programs that invited students to define success and assume a leading role in crafting programmatic interventions. Students, not project leads, became the key drivers of organizational change.

When asked to describe her position on campus, Ella, a co-lead for a climate and belonging project, offered these thoughts on student success:

> My kind of overarching role is to support students in any way that they need. So, I see myself as a liaison, as an advocate, as a conduit to, really, their ultimate success, and essentially, what the definition of success is for them, not necessarily what it is based on the way the institution deems it.

Although Ella emphasized the importance of GPA and graduation, "ultimate success" in her understanding included students' sense of self-worth and willingness to intervene in contexts

of social injustice. Ella re-positioned students as designers of academic and social supports rather than simply as recipients of these supports by providing an opportunity for them to create orientation programs for other historically underserved students. Through the design and implementation processes, students worked to embed in the programs their own immediate and long-term visions of success.

Ella's co-lead, Nate, echoed this interest in student-driven approaches to program development. According to Nate, student-driven programming created ways for students to move "beyond whatever expectations they have of themselves and the expectations of society." Nate rejected traditional roles that positioned himself as the expert and sole leader. Instead, he invited students to design campus events and activities for their peers. Nate also understood this participatory approach as a complementary way for students to succeed on prevailing measures of student success. For Nate, inviting students to "own" their education created spaces of belonging on campus, which allowed them to succeed academically and persist to graduation. Together Ella and Nate created opportunities for students to appropriate and redefine existing conceptions of student success on their own terms.

Other interviewees echoed this interest in creating opportunities for students to assume leading roles in student success projects. Olivia, a staff member and co-lead for a different student-led climate and belonging project, described student success less as an outcome and more as something cultivated through ongoing forms of student participation and engagement. She called for "more programs that are representative and more inclusive of students of color in shaping those programs." Olivia was critical of intermittent and opportune university efforts to include student voice, such as in the aftermath of discriminatory events or hate crimes. She argued that including students in conversations about their own success can create new approaches and strategies that are more relevant to their everyday lives. Her programming, which was intended to elevate conversations about diversity throughout the entire campus community, featured students as the content creators. Olivia stated, "To be divorced from the solution is very alienating. How might we engage students in discussions of problem solving?" Like Ella and Nate, Olivia used her institutional authority to create opportunities for students of color to appropriate and lead university conversations about what it means to be a successful student.

Attending to "Belonging" on Campus Many faculty and staff project leads used language related to student belonging as a way to describe student success in the context of their own projects and the broader university. Sense of belonging refers to students' perceptions of being part of the university community and having a role in academic and social contexts that enhance their "affiliations and identity with their colleges," (Hurtado & Carter, 1997, p. 328). Two-thirds of the interviewees referred to "belonging," conceiving of it as a mediating outcome for other student success metrics and as a valuable indicator of student success in its own right.

For example, Susan oversaw a climate and belonging project, and she felt that nontraditional students "…would often come to the university feeling like… suffering from the imposter syndrome. Feeling that they don't fit; there's not a sense of belonging." She saw her work as providing opportunities for nontraditional students to identify a community, the members of which shared similar experiences and could act as mentors as they navigated the university. Her project did this by expanding programming to serve a larger number of students with more opportunities for contacts with peers and mentors.

Yvonne, whose project focused on faculty and staff planning and professional development, saw embedding practices to support students' sense of belonging as essential in her design

process. In designing her professional development programming, she intentionally incorpo-rated fostering a sense of belonging as a message for trainees to convey in their one-on-one work with students.

> The long-term outcome[s] we want is for [a program] to be a safe and effective place for students to come and get support. And ultimately, have a sense of belonging and engagement, contribute to that larger effort of the campus.

By inserting mechanisms for creating a sense of belonging into staff professional development, Yvonne hoped that all students would have the opportunity to see themselves as part of a larger campus community that respected them and was available to support them.

Audrey led a climate and belonging project aimed at helping first-year students acclimate to campus, with a focus on first-generation students. She viewed being part of a community on campus as essential for student success because peer-to-peer connections would aid first-generation students in knowing about and accessing campus resources. She explained that creating a sense of belonging was a way of giving voice to historically underserved students so they could act as change agents on campus. She embedded a student reflection piece into her project because:

> …we're hoping that students would tell us, like, what do you want faculty in fact to know about your experience. And the hope with that was that they would talk about some of the strengths that they had and some of the other challenges so that we can think about—I think inform the campus a little bit about how to … better serve students who are maybe of dangerous backgrounds.

Audrey felt that this approach to student success programming could challenge deficit narratives about first-generation students by elevating the different strengths and assets that historically underserved and nontraditional students bring with them to campus.

These examples demonstrate the importance of considering students' campus experiences as more than interpersonal exchanges, rather to understand them as a part of a larger institutional experience through which students can feel welcomed and heard. A sense of belonging was a salient feature of programing across the projects and shaped the ways in which many project leads approached their work.

Discussion

Determining what "counts" as student success is a value-laden and politically fraught process (Ball, 1995). Our study of 23 specific projects contributes new social and political values into existing debates by offering ideas about student success as articulated by faculty and staff members who worked daily with historically underserved and nontraditional students. Project leads—whose work was not tightly bound to competitive "rankings games" and accountability requirements (Brankovic, 2018, p. 698)—interpreted student success in ways that critiqued, challenged, and extended the general understanding of the concept. We argue that these more democratic and participatory conceptions of student success could guide the formation of improved support, structures, and processes at institutions of higher education. This increased support and expanded understanding of what constitutes student success may, in turn, con-tribute to more just and fair outcomes and opportunities for historically underserved and nontraditional students.

One implication that stems from our analysis is the need to attend to how university faculty and staff interpret and implement an ostensibly objective and universal understanding of student success. Many of our interviewees questioned assumptions about traditional student success metrics and explored ways to expand these conceptions. Project leads drew on their interactions with students to expose contradictions, such as how time-to-degree efforts can promote stigmatizing and deficit views of historically underserved students. These observations are essential given the increasing diversity of students attending institutions of higher education (Eagan et al., 2016), whose conceptions of success may differ significantly from conceptions of success premised on more individualistic and entrepreneurial orientations (Dorius, Tandberg, & Cram, 2017; Wood & Breyer, 2017). Project leads spoke of students arriving on campus interested in "making a difference," an ideal that, while broad, affords opportunities for universities to guide students' interests and curiosities toward collective struggles of justice, rather than focus on metrics like post-graduation earnings. Project leads did not merely critique and oppose prevailing metrics of student success; they created and proposed alternative interpretations of what student success could look like (Green, 2017).

Our findings also raise questions about existing organizational structures that constrain opportunities for alternative forms of student success to flourish. Project leads used student success funds to implement new approaches to programming and instruction that were otherwise bound by traditional discipline-based approaches or hierarchical faculty-student roles. In particular, we find potential value in student-driven programming as one way to enact more participatory student success interventions that allow students to assume leadership roles while simultaneously providing supports for similar peers.

Currently the legacy of innovation embedded in the 23 projects can be seen in the "whole student" framing of student success embraced by the UCSC Division of Student Success (University of California, Santa Cruz Division of Student Success, 2019). We see these shifts in language and approach as promising moves forward. Yet, more work is needed to develop and sustain student success innovations and conceptions beyond this one-time funding opportunity and more broadly throughout the field of higher education.

Limitations and Future Research

This study was limited to one specific organization and one specific funding context. Findings may not be generalizable to other institutional settings given that the respondent pool is not representative of all faculty and staff, even within the University; and interviewees included only those who applied for and whose projects were selected for funding. Although interviews with project leads offered insights into the interpretive frameworks faculty and staff members employed, they did not provide a full account of the practices used in implementing the interventions. The timing of the interviews, which occurred toward the end of the academic-year in which the projects were implemented, also limited interviewees' abilities to comment on the long-term success of their projects.

Future studies might employ participant-observational methods to offer greater insight into how faculty and staff implement alternative conceptions of student success and what barriers they encounter along the way. These studies can extend the analyses reported in this study by illuminating the situational contexts in which some conceptions of student success thrive whereas other conceptions are obstructed. Future research might also explore how faculty and staff design and organize student-driven approaches to student success programming and how

students might also participate in evaluation and ongoing program improvement. These participatory relations might sustain initiatives which better ensure that ideas about student success remain tied to the everyday realities and hopes of historically underserved and nontraditional students.

Conclusion

Our study revealed how faculty and staff working closely with historically underserved students might guide the ways that higher education researchers and policy makers conceptualize and organize interventions for student success. In addition to focusing upon traditional student success metrics such as retention, time-to-degree, and graduation, higher education leaders might also turn toward sources of knowledge within the institution as an innovative basis for developing equity-oriented institutional programs and processes. Relying on the expertise of staff, faculty, and students might guide the development of institutional supports that are more relevant and responsive to the experiences of historically underserved and nontraditional students, whom higher education institutions aim to serve.

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