Thinking theologically about student success: Higher education with a higher calling

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Abstract
Scholarly definitions of student success have become increasingly transactional and thereby reflect a specific form of modern utilitarianism. In this paper, we use a theological map to explore the terrain of contemporary student success scholarship and practice in an effort to re-imagine how the Christian faith might animate a vision of student success for scholar-practitioners. First, we review the current scholarly landscape, second, we show where it falls short. Third, we use the practical theological method to outline a theological vision of student success. Finally, we propose ways to bridge the gap between current practice and theological vision.

If you were hunting for buried treasure, what would you need? You would need the right resources like a good map, a pickaxe or shovel, and a knowledge of treasure such that you would know when you had found what you were looking for. Without any of these resources you would be unlikely to find any treasure at all. Without a map (or the right

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map), how would you know where to dig? Without a shovel, how would you get at what you had found? Without a knowledge of what you were looking for, you might mistake granite for gold. Without these supplies you could exert a great deal of effort and yet consistently achieve poor results. What if we told you contemporary definitions of student success have left those working in Christian higher education to search for treasure with a poor map, the wrong kind of tools, and incomplete ways of identifying what we have found? In short, what if we told you that we lack an imagination for real success?

Some of you may be quick to agree with this diagnosis. Others may be a bit more skeptical and require further proof for such a claim. In this paper, we use a theological map to help us explore the terrain of contemporary student success scholarship and practice in an effort to re-imagine our collective hunt for treasure. We do so because we believe that contemporary student success efforts falter along the same lines as our imagined treasure hunter. This is true even for student success administrators working at Christian colleges who—despite personal convictions—are still essentially relying on maps, tools, and definitions from pluralistic sources rather than seeking out distinctively Christian approaches. It is not that pluralistic student success literature yields no favorable outcomes—it certainly does, but these resources are incomplete and, as a result, we use language that has subtly altered our view of students. Because we do not see students rightly (faulty map), we have used the wrong tools (measures and associated methods) to discover and cultivate only scraps of treasure. The uncritical implementation of practices from pluralistic sources has made us (Christian student success administrators) like a treasure hunter who digs for hours and becomes elated to have found a few gold coins that had fallen out of a bulging chest as it was carried off to be buried a few feet away. These "coins" are valuable, but incomplete. We have been satisfied by too little. So how can we find the full bounty? What tools do we need to uncover it? How will we know what we are seeking after? In addition to providing a better map and better tools, practical theological thinking can help redefine the goal of our search and thereby ensure we find that for which we were truly looking—the full bounty of student success.

In this paper, we want to invite you to reflect on what Christian higher education deems to be important so that we can collectively consider if the current definitions and practices of student success are actually helping us find the best treasure. We will use theological thinking to help equip Christians responsible for student success to critically engage extant literature before laying the groundwork for a "practical theology of student success."

First, we will review the current scholarly landscape, including the "maps" that often guide us and the "tools" of discovery to show where they fall short. Second, we will use the practical theological method to interpret current practice theologically. Third, we outline a theological vision of student success before (fourth) proposing ways to bridge the gap between current practice and theological vision. Finally, in the appendices we offer additional resources for our community of scholar-practitioners to consider including a program assessment toolkit and an annotated bibliography of research that is congruent with Christian definitions of student success.

The current landscape

Higher education has taken a number of forms throughout American history, each with its own way of defining student success—successful students were good humanists, good citizens, or good leaders (Kerr, 2001; Thelin, 2011). Today's definitions of student success have become increasingly transactional. Success is linked to quantitative outcomes and the practical utility of a degree (Engell and Dangerfield, 2005). Students gauge their "success" by their answers to pragmatic questions: "Will I be equipped for a job? How much money will that job make out of college? Over a lifetime?" These questions seem to suggest that students are customers on the hunt for "goods" that can only be attained after earning the credential college provides (Brown, 2001).

Although critiquing a utilitarian view of education is nothing new (c.f. Hutchins, 1995; Newman and Svaglic, 1982; Postman, 1995), today's forms of utilitarian thinking are marked by more modern impulses. To view education in this way perpetuates, as Smith (2009) describes, "an egocentric way of looking at the world, as if all these things were there for me, and for me to do with them as I please" (p. 40). This emphasis on the self also transforms how students see our institutions. Rather than places of formation, "[institutions] become platforms for performance, where individuals are allowed to be their authentic selves precisely because they are able to give expression to who they are 'inside'" (Trueman, 2020: 49). The call to "know thyself" is no longer about conforming to a societally or divinely defined vision of the good life (as it had been since ancient Greece), but instead a call to cultivate the "expressive individual" whose sense of meaning is bound up with his/her ability to express individual feelings and desires (Taylor, 2007; Trueman, 2020).

We suspect many reading this are, at this point, nodding their heads in agreement with the shortcomings of students' definitions of success. But before we place the blame fully on students (faulty as their consumeristic approaches may be), or "culture" (faulty as some underlying ideologies may be), we must begin with some self-reflection. In what ways have we as student success professionals perpetuated such a consumeristic view of students in how we evaluate them? What elements of our student success initiatives stoke the fires of expressive individualism? How does the language we use define the reality of our interaction with students?

Measuring success

The best way to begin answering these questions is to look at the language our institutions use as we measure success. After all, these measurements are the metrics for which individual staff and administrators are responsible and the grounds for the interventions we decide to implement. As a result, these are the numbers that determine if a particular staff member or initiative is effective or not. Thus, regardless of the various qualitative or humanistic ideals an institution espouses, the metrics for which a staff member is responsible end up revealing the truer assumptions about the definition of student success. They establish the language an institution uses when they make decisions, and this "language matters because it shapes the collective imagination of an institution…"

(Davis, 2020: 345). Over time, the language staff use will shape and define what they believe success to be.

In our treasure hunting terms, these "tools" of evaluation reveal both the treasure for which institutions are searching and the "maps" they used to get there. In this next section, we will explore some of the major metrics used to define success in current student success literature. The metrics fall within one of three categories: student inputs, in-college student metrics, and post-college student metrics.

Student input metrics

We borrowed the language of "student inputs" from Barr and Tagg's (1995) critique of what they call the "instruction paradigm." In this paradigm they suggest "we judge our colleges by comparing them to one another…[thus,] the criteria for quality are defined in terms of inputs and process measures" (p. 16). Their critique is that colleges are assessed on the basis of the type of students they can *attract*, and not by how much learning or transformation actually takes place. This emphasis on inputs implicitly links a student's "success" to the ability of the institution they attend to collect students with the best high school GPA or rankings, standardized test scores, and—more recently—various forms of diversity (ethnic, gender, SES, etc.). The more selective the institution (based on these metrics) the more "successful" its students. The lower the admissions rate, the better and more successful students will become once they attend. Few today would actually describe student success in these terms, but institutions are likely to imply it when they tout admissions statistics on their website. Another example comes from the U.S. News and World Report rankings. When calculating the 2021 rankings, 17.5% of the final metric was based on input factors (accepted Pell students, selectivity and size of incoming class; Morse and Brooks, 2020). In fact, only 40% of rankings were determined by student outcomes (retention, graduation, and debt payoff)—and even those numbers exhibited a limited view of success for reasons we will discuss in the coming paragraphs. Rather than evaluating success by measuring actual student learning, transformation, or growth, the input metrics discussed here imply that the prestige of the institution is what leads to student success.

In-college student metrics

Most of the self-proclaimed student success literature assesses in-college student metrics like retention and graduation. Early student success metrics deemed students to be "successful" if they graduated rather than left college (Tinto, 1987, 1993). However, as access to higher education continued to expand in the early 2000s (Habley et al., 2012; Thelin, 2011), scholars realized the errors of such a simple approach to student success (e.g., Hurtado and Carter, 1997). These critiques led to the expansion of scholarship proposing and assessing various interventions intended to enhance student engagement as well as student graduation rates (e.g., Kuh et al., 2010; Kuh and Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2008). The inclusion of "engagement" as an outcome drew upon the legacy of student involvement literature (e.g., Astin, 1984, 1996) coming out of

the field of student affairs. But even this expanded definition has its limits, and—as a result—others have continued to expand definitions of success by exploring what leads to student belonging (e.g., Museus et al., 2017; Strayhorn, 2012) or student "thriving" (Schreiner et al., 2012).

What is interesting about these in-college metrics is that they all take an institutional perspective. They prescribe student success from the institution-down (Cockle, 2019), that is with primarily institutional goals in mind. They justify measuring student engagement, belonging, or thriving, not because student wellness is good in its own right but because they lead to more favorable and practical outcomes for the institution. We admit that institutions need to retain students to meet tuition goals and to ensure students can continue to benefit from their mission, but even that binds success to the structures of the institution rather than to students themselves. This begs the question, what effect does an institution-down approach to student success mean for how we view students?

The effects of the institution-down approach are reflected in the fragmented nature of our student affairs efforts. Each of a student's potential needs becomes the responsibility of a different department and the student is left to do the work of integrating all the pieces on their own. In addition to academics, student affairs divisions have offices responsible for residence life, student activities and involvement, multicultural affairs, career or vocation services, new student experience, disability services, counseling and mental health, student success, student conduct, spiritual life, commuter services, and transfer students, to name a few. When each of these offices has their own mission and their staff work toward fulfilling that particular mission, it requires a staff member going above and beyond to help the student make sense of how all the pieces fit together. Good student affairs professionals see the integration of the college experience as their work, but far too often they have to work against the departmental systems in place to do so (Glanzer et al., 2020).

Moreover, even if an institution's efforts succeed and a student finds integration and belonging on campus, of what benefit is a sense of belonging to a college community after a student graduates? Indeed, this is where the language of these in-college "outcomes" often falls short. By focusing on in-college metrics, student success measures and interventions only account for students in the short-term with little to no assessment of the holistic impact down the road. Will these students be involved, thrive, or find belonging once they graduate? These metrics cannot tell us. They are helpful, but incomplete.

Post-college student metrics

The final category of assessment is related to post-college student metrics. These are the metrics that colleges and universities have begun to tout on their websites such as job-placement and debt payoff rates. Even college rankings now include such measures in their calculations (Morse and Brooks, 2020). These metrics define a student as successful based on the types of jobs they can achieve after college, and whether or not such jobs can adequately help them pay off their debts. Although these measures consider the lives of students beyond graduation, they continue to emphasize the view that higher education is merely a transaction. When administrators describe or imply success with economic

language, they reinforce the belief that higher education is no more than an exchange of tuition for increased earning potential.

Student success is surely not less than career and economic gains, but we hope it would be more than that. A group of sociologists studying emerging adults said it well, "the most important payoffs of college education do not concern career promotions and higher salaries" (Smith et al., 2011: 101). Rather than an instrumental view of education, we believe it is also about establishing meaningful relationships (Sriram et al., 2020), developing the "whole person" (American Council on Education, 1937), discovering a sense of vocation (e.g., Clydesdale, 2016; Wadell and Pinches, 2021) or purpose (e.g., Glanzer et al., 2017b), and the cultivation of an educated citizenry (Bok, 2006) to name a few. These are all outcomes that are being measured in higher education scholarship, but far too often these outcomes are neglected in the student success conversations on Christian campuses. As a result, student successes are defined on grounds that justify the value of the institution, rather than on the grounds of holistic student flourishing.

Before we even begin to explore student success theologically, take a moment to reflect on the metrics, the practices, and the language your office and institution use. What does your institution espouse success to be in mission statements and learning outcomes and what does it actually require you to measure? What do you actually find yourself talking about? If your metrics and language are similar to ours, we are "on the line" for some standard measures: retention, graduation, job placement, and debt payoff. If our definitions of success and motivations for particular interventions are evaluated on the basis of what we measure, and these are our measures, then we within Christian higher education do not look all that unique from our pluralistic peers. We in Christian higher education need to excavate, recover, re-imagine, or create better ways of measuring and talking about what makes students successful.

Questioning the tools, questioning the maps

The problem with the current conceptualization of student success is not necessarily the tools we are using to measure it—limited though they may be. The true issue is that these tools rely on the wrong maps (view of the student) and therefore define the treasure of student success in troubling ways. These borrowed maps of the human person embedded in the current tools lead administrators and the students to presume that the pursuit of success is a hunt for existential treasure. That is to say, students ought to accumulate various smaller human achievements to help define themselves. Thus, the measures and associated methods (tools) we borrow are able to assess and cultivate the treasure they espouse, but their assumptions about humanity (maps) are not always in line with Christian assumptions about humanity. As a result, the success they imply administrators ought to seek does not fully capture what Christian administrators should define as their goal.

For example, a significant number of student success interventions are based on the results described in *Student Success in College* (Kuh et al., 2010) and prescribed by high-impact practices (Kuh and Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2008). Although these practices are no doubt helpful (and likely

have many benefits), the fact remains that they were based on a rather limited definition of success—"higher-than-predicted graduation rates and better-than-predicted student engagement" (Kuh et al., 2010: xii). Success is surely not less than these things, but we posit here that it must certainly be more.

If this all sounds a bit circular, it is because it is. A limited definition of success (treasure/goal) has led us to view students in incomplete ways (maps), which has led us to use incomplete methods and measures (tools). Our continued reliance on these limited methods and measures will, in turn, perpetuate an incomplete view of the student and, thereby, limited definitions of success. Therefore, rather than merely trying to find Christian treasures with incomplete (and incongruent) maps of the student, we need to create new maps of the human person that are more firmly rooted in theological thinking. These, in turn, will help Christian administrators re-center definitions of student success that fit within God's story of redemptive history. With more expansive definitions of student success, we can see students as God sees them and prioritize methods and measures that better reflect such views. In short, thinking theologically about student success provides us with a good definition of what we are searching for, a better understanding of where to look, and better tools for uncovering what we find.

Thinking theologically: The practical theological method

What does it mean to think "theologically" about student success? Although it is common to speak or write casually about "theologies" of various parts or practices of the Christian life (e.g., a theology of suffering, a theology of consumption, etc.), it is important to note that there are a variety of theological disciplines (e.g., systematic, biblical, historical, practical) that use established methods to arrive at detailed "theologies." Thus, as we begin constructing a theology of student success, it is important to note that our "theology" is based in the methods of practical theology—a particular field within the theological disciplines that explores the relationship between theological truth and practice in order "to realize a measure of unity in our knowing, doing, and being" (Ogletree, 1983: 97). More specifically, "Practical theology is a theological *reflection* and *construction* arising out of and giving guidance to a community of faith in the praxis of its mission" (Fowler, 1983: 149, emphasis added). This method comprised of reflection and construction is typically carried out through a four stage process where the first two stages are devoted to reflection and second two stages are devoted to construction (Osmer, 2008). The practical theologian (a) describes current practice of a faith community and (b) interprets the reasons why those practices are happening. Then, in light of this reflection, the theologian (c) asks what *should* be happening in that space and (d) how to bridge the gap between what is happening and what should be happening. Therefore, when we say we want to think theologically about student success, it means that we are asking, how *does* and how *should* the Christian faith impact how we understand student success?

Practical theological thinking is particularly helpful for our purposes in student success because its methods assume the corporate nature of the Church and its purposes. The very discipline of practical theology itself is reliant on other branches of theology to establish "truth" (Fowler, 1983). Thus, to think theologically about student success will require

Christian administrators to rely on others in their college or university to help define student success. This corporate approach to knowledge about student success (and truth more broadly) helps restore a fundamental truth of the Christian approach to higher education which has been neglected in practice—the reality that "knowledge is intimately united in itself, as being the acts and the work of the Creator" (Newman and Svaglic, 1982: 75). A theologically informed definition of success will therefore require inter-disciplinary thinking in order to capture the whole of what we hope our students to become. No single field or metric can account for the whole.

A theological interpretation of the current landscape

In the first part of this paper, we explored the current landscape of student success literature and practice, thereby completing the first stage of the practical theological method. We highlighted a variety of tools (student inputs, in-college metrics, and post-college metrics) and the incomplete definitions of success they implied. In this section we will offer our theological interpretation as to why administrators are relying on these limited views. In short, we believe the Christian faith is too often an assumed part of student success work rather than the central animating principle.

For those familiar with conversations about the integration of faith and learning, the affordances of the Christian story for student success work may seem obvious. Yet, a recent study of Christian student affairs professionals revealed that while they were aware of a variety of tenets of the Christian faith and used theological terms, they had not fully realized how they (the tenets and terms) fit together or what implications they had for practice (Glanzer et al., 2020). Far too many professionals assumed their faith in Christ would naturally work its way into their practice or merely saw their faith as something to add to their otherwise secular approach. For example, a group of administrators might pray for students before they met to discuss the same success metrics used on pluralistic campuses. Prayer is always helpful, but because the administrators merely added faith, they failed to question the basic assumptions embedded within the definitions of humanity that were (perhaps) unknowingly borrowed in the success instrument they acquired from pluralistic colleges and universities.

Without taking the time to do the necessary work of integration (and it *is* work), Christian institutions end up neglecting the central feature that distinguishes them from pluralistic universities—namely, their Christian mission and definitions of success. Rather than trying to show how similar we are to secular institutions by using the same tools (measures and methods) and the faulty maps (views of humanity) which led to them, we believe administrators in Christian higher education need to be increasingly clear about how the Bible's understanding of the human person is quite different than the fragmented, reductionistic visions of students exhibited by most pluralistic schools today (Glanzer, 2022).

In short, we worry that administrators responsible for student success at Christian colleges and universities (some of whom were included in the study of Christian student affairs professionals) have yet to allow their faith to fully *animate* their approach to student success (Davis, 2017; Glanzer et al., 2020; Glanzer and Alleman, 2019). When something is animated, it is brought to life (think of the vision of the valley of dry bones in Ezekiel 37, Christ's

resurrection, or our own necessary experience of being "born again"). Thus, Christ animating student success involves practice that is brought to life—flesh, bones, and all the rest—on the basis of Christ and the story of his "restoring, reconciling grace for all of creation" (Smith, 2013: 157). When Christ enlivens something, he does so completely and comprehensively. Thus, the following theological vision of student success is meant to define student success with the Christian narrative as the central animating principle.

Defining our treasure: A theological vision for student success

A Christ animated approach to student success involves a radical commitment to truths about the nature of God and humanity—as outlined in scripture—that matter and that have implications for how we carry out our work in Christian higher education. We recognize that there is no shortage of disagreement about how one might describe "the nature of God and humanity," and yet, even the most basic Christian commitments (e.g., a trinitarian God who, in his self-giving love, sent his only son to redeem a people unto himself) provides a story that reframes how we, as a field, might view success. Rather than a hunt for existential treasure, thinking theologically about student success turns a treasure map into a roadmap toward our heavenly home. Our students are no longer pirates fighting for existential survival, but pilgrims headed toward the ends toward which humans were lovingly and intentionally made. In this way, the Christian narrative provides a definition of student success by providing a new and better map (view of the human person).

The full extent of how Christ or the Christian story might animate success is a conversation this paper is intended to initiate. Our thoughts are by no means exhaustive nor are they above critique. That said, we offer them with the hope of sparking a conversation amongst administrators in Christian higher education about what it might mean to think theologically about student success. What follows is our preliminary attempt at using Scripture and theological reflection to shift the definition of student success from limited measures and outcomes to a process of helping students increasingly situate themselves within the Christian story.

The Bible describes God as the creator and sustainer of all things, including humanity. In the garden, God made man in his own image (Gen 1:27). To bear God's image is both a "gift and a task" (Horton, 2011: 405). In addition to the gift of dignity and the opportunity to reflect substantive faculties or qualities of God (Horton, 2011; Köstenberger, 2011), image-bearing in scripture suggests that humanity is "derivative [of God] and consequently subject to [his] authority" (Kline, 1980: 34). Thus, with the gift of reflecting God's image comes a specific covenantal task to steward that gift by representing God's glory on earth (Horton, 2011; Köstenberger, 2011). Horton (2011) describes the specific task of image bearing this way:

> …it is God's command and promise—the role that he gives them in his unfolding drama— that constitute the uniqueness of human beings…the *imago Dei* is the moral likeness of human beings to their Creator and the covenantal commission with which Adam was entrusted; namely to enter God's everlasting Sabbath with the whole creation in his train. (p. 397)

Rather than merely a set of abilities that reflect God's likeness, to refer to image-bearing is also to refer to a particular task. Yet, our ability to fulfill the covenantal task of ushering creation and ourselves into God's *shalom* was prevented when our first parents fell in the garden (Gen 3). Fortunately, where the first Adam (and us by extension) failed to fulfill the mandate of image bearing, Christ (the new Adam) succeeded (Rom 5:18–19; 1 Cor 15:22, 45). In this way, Christ establishes the prime example of what it means to bear God's image as a human (Cortez, 2017; Ware, 2013). As such, the biblical vision of being "conformed to the image of [the Father's] son" (Rom 8:29) is not merely a call to look like Jesus in his general capacities, dispositions, and actions, but increasingly identifying with his fulfillment of the *imago Dei* mandate by the regenerating and sanctifying work of the Spirit. This identification, or union, with Christ is therefore intrinsic to what it means to be most fully bear God's image as humans.

Although Christian higher education is distinct from the Church, to identify something as *Christian* should mean that the ultimate ends are aligned with the ultimate goals of the Christian story. Therefore, to think theologically about student success would be to help students—through the particular methods of higher education—increasingly situate themselves within the Christian story. We believe successful students are those who, by faith, acknowledge Christ's fulfillment of the *imago Dei*, and having been justified, work out their salvation with fear and trembling (Phil 2:12). This working out of salvation is not a work of justification, but the work of the Spirit in us and through us to better resemble the declaration of righteousness and completion God has already bestowed (Murray, 1955). This is exactly how Hugh of St Victor (c. 1130/1991), an early "administrator" of Christian higher education, defined student success. He believed the goal of higher education was "to restore within us the divine likeness" that was marred by the fall (p. 61). But this, of course, raises larger questions: Is that kind of restoration possible in four to six years, or even this side of heaven? And what would it actually look like?

These practical questions lead us to the theological work of Bishop Robert Barron (1998) who—like St Victor—believes "resemble[ing] the divine" (p. 186) is the goal of Christian transformation. He defines Christian transformation as "go[ing] beyond the mind that you have...to change [your] way of knowing, [your] way of seeing" (p. 5). Transformation in this sense is not mere cognitive understanding. Instead, "it has everything to do with radical change of life and vision, with the simple (and dreadfully complex) process of allowing oneself to swim in the divine sea, to find the true self by letting go of the old [self-elevating] center" (Barron, 1998: 9). Said another way, as we did earlier, it is increasingly situating oneself in the Christian narrative.

A transformation that leads to seeing rightly, according to Bishop Barron (1998), requires a shift of the soul that changes the lens through which one sees the world. In our fallen state, we try to find shalom on our own (autonomously) and for our own gain (ego-driven). As a result, we try to shrink and contain the world (a limiting lens). In contrast, Barron suggests placing ourselves within the Christian narrative helps us cultivate an expansive, God-centered way of seeing. The limiting lens, he suggests, is a defensive strategy of the "terrified and self-regarding small soul" (p. 6) wherein a self-elevating ego grasps for control because it sees God (knowingly or not) as a rival or "competing supreme being" (p. 246). This competition is not merely with God, but with all others.

"When the ego has made itself the center of its universe, then all other things and people are potential or actual rivals, and they must be kept at bay" (p. 224). Whereas the limiting lens results in a smaller vision of the world in an effort to control it, the God-centered expansive lens does the opposite. The expansive lens is the way of seeing associated with "the well-ordered soul, the psyche that has centered itself exclusively on Christ and whose energies and powers have found their harmonious place around that center" (p. 211). Barron continues, "when we surrender in trust to the bearing power of God…we can let go of fear and begin to live in radical trust" (p. 6). Therefore, although an expansive lens makes a person smaller in comparison to the world, they are nonetheless more secure because they trust God's authority over the world and their place before God because of Christ's completed work.

Although Bishop Barron describes Christian transformation for all of life and not merely for education, we nonetheless believe a Christian view of student success cannot be separated from this way of seeing. Indeed, the ways of seeing Barron (1998) describes lead to two different approaches to education. Educational efforts that cultivate the autonomous and ego-driven self, aim to make the world smaller, limiting possible threats. Knowledge is acquired safely and as a form of gaining control over the world. Cultivating the God-centered self does the opposite. Because of the security one finds in focusing on Christ, education can be used to expand one's view of God and his created order without fear. Thus, Christian higher education is not solely responsible for the transformation of all of life and yet can still contribute to it in significant ways.

By working toward the "creation and redemption of learners and learning" (Ream and Glanzer, 2013: 54), colleges and universities can support the Church's transformative efforts by supplying knowledge about God and God's created order (including humanity). Placing academic work within the Christian story in this way models an adoption of the Christian narrative as the central ordering principle of life. Additionally, Ream and Glanzer's view of the purpose of higher education (the creation and redemption of learners and learning) is broad enough to include both the pursuit of truth, which is typically codified in the "research" focus of faculty, as well as the dissemination of such knowledge through teaching and campus life. These two elements, in tandem, work to further the process of student transformation toward the restoration of the divine likeness.

With all this in mind, we define student success as something distinct from the general Christian call to be sanctified, and yet also part of it. We believe that the college experience ought—ultimately—to help further the restoration of the divine likeness in students by helping them to "go beyond the mind that they have," to see the world expansively through the cultivation of the self in right relation to God and his creation. The more students see rightly, the better equipped they will be to order and enrich their "loves in the context of [their] most important relationships and human practices" (Ream and Glanzer, 2013: 3). This ordering of loves and relationships is like what Wolterstorff (2004) describes as living in *shalom*—right relationship with God, others, and nature. Recognizing that this transformation, this ordering of loves, is a lifelong project, we submit that a significant goal of our work is to help students define these as the ends towards which their lives are aimed. Thus, student success must be bound to a particular understanding of human success as defined by Scripture.

To define success in this way—as the restoration of the divine likeness—overcomes the limitations of current student success practices above. First, rather than defining success by student inputs, this vision of success places responsibility on the institution to use their resources and methods to help students situate success within the Christian story. Second, rather than limiting success to in-college outcomes, this definition of success helps administrators re-envision their work in light of the long-term goal of Christian image-bearing. If the hosts of student development departments see their goal in light of this larger end, each department will also be encouraged to help situate their offerings within the larger whole rather than forcing students to do that work on their own. Third, this vision of student success does not negate the importance of post-college outcomes like careers or economic gains but puts them in their proper place in relation to God's transcendent purpose for their life. In short, rather than defining success according to the individual or to society it is, instead, rooted in the covenantal commission God gave to his image bearers.

Maps and tools: Bridging the gap between current and ideal practice

The fourth and final step of the practical theological method employs the theological imagination to explore what it would take to move from current to ideal practice. In this case, how can we shift our student success practice from limited and secularly defined visions of success to a Christ animated vision of success? We contend it requires reimagining students as dependent and whole persons (new map) and then using methods and measures (new tools) that accord with our theological assumptions about the nature of success.

Seeing students as dependent and whole persons

The first step to bridging the gap between what student success currently is and what student success ought to be is to see students rightly. Because our theological vision of student success rests so heavily on a correct understanding of humanity and the *imago Dei*, enacting such a vision requires a biblical understanding of human dependency and what it means to be whole.

Although few administrators would claim the cultivation of the ego-driven self, and the corresponding limiting lens Barron (1998) describes, as their student success "treasure," it has become the de facto approach of the pluralistic university. Contemporary student success efforts use the language of "self-authorship" (Baxter Magolda, 2001, 2004) and are tied to the "expressive individualism" (Taylor, 1989; Trueman, 2020) that provides avenues for students to "give expression to [their] own feelings and desires" (Trueman, 2020: 46). It is not that autonomy and individual expression are inherently wrong, but when they are the goal (even at Christian institutions), education becomes the egocentric consumeristic project we described in the introduction where students act "as if all these things were there for [them], and for [them] to do with...as [they] please" (Smith, 2009: 40). Christian administrators need to help students find a new way of seeing that provides individual expression in the context of God's design for human dependence—both individually and in community (see Kapic, 2022). Helping students situate themselves

within the Christian story will help them see that "we were created with dependency [on God and others] in mind" (Kapic, 2022: 62).

Further, we need to challenge ourselves to imagine students in ways that reflect the wholeness of who God created humans to be. Current student success metrics and measures often see students as a collection of various identity pieces. Scholars categorize students by race/ethnicity, social class, gender, academic ability, class rank and create maps—based on how these various identities intersect—in order to assess a student's ability to retain. As we have been saying, these measures and categorizations are not wrong, but they have become wrongly situated. Through our consistent parsing of students, we have habituated in our minds an understanding that whole students are the sum of some collection of these pieces. The reality, however, is that they are whole image-bearing humans *before* they were identified by any of these particularities. "The whole person precedes—and thereby contextualizes—the parts. Yet much of student affairs theory and practice works under the assumption that the parts combine to determine the whole" (Glanzer et al., 2020: 84). This distinction may seem subtle to the point of insignificance but consider how it plays out in student success.

Since Tinto's initial models, scholars have tried to explain reasons why college students leave (e.g., Braxton et al., 2014) or how we can help them stay (e.g., Habley et al., 2012), and they do so largely on the basis of some combination of demographic variables. These models can be helpful as we map out our retention goals, but we must be careful not to associate student value with the demographics they possess—no matter how much our models tell us they are favorable/unfavorable. Because students are image bearers first, they have an inherent dignity regardless of their capacity for retention or departure. Again, this shift is subtle, but it reminds us that students do not retain or achieve on the basis of some demographic statistic, but the very human story for which that statistic is but a mere proxy. The solution is not to get more favorable students (input measures), but to imagine and learn new ways of helping students who tend to struggle, even if they are only under our mission for a short time. Seeing students as whole persons first helps expand our maps by reminding us that graduating from college is not the only way of achieving or ensuring the good life. As much as it might hurt our numbers, more college is not always the right answer for every student. Seeing students in this way is almost certain to be less efficient, inefficient, but then again, there were times the Lord commanded inefficiency for the sake of the least of these (Lev 19:9). Additionally, a student may retain and matriculate all the way through to graduation (in 4 years no less!) and yet—lacking the holistic transformation that our Christian mission promised—fail to truly launch into adulthood in ways aligned with the divine calling. The more we can see students in their entirety, the more we can help students.

The tools we need: Methods and measures

Finally, to move our vision of student success forward, Christian higher education is in need of new tools—both student success methods and measures—that reflect the understanding of student success espoused by our Christian missions. We need tools that help us cultivate, assess, and talk about the extent to which our students have begun to see

rightly. We need tools that help cultivate and assess whether or not our students have encountered, found themselves within, and been transformed by the Christian story.

There is a growing body of literature describing methods that might lead to the kind of formation we have outlined in this paper (e.g., Glanzer, 2021; Setran 2013; Smith, 2013). Although much of it is written for the broader Christian church, the implications for Christian higher education are often clear. These scholars suggest that practices that capture students' imagination through truth and beauty (Smith, 2013) in the context of faithful Christian community and mentorship (Glanzer, 2021) are particularly formative. These practices must go beyond personal spiritual development and cultivate students' dispositions to seek the flourishing of others (Setran, 2018). Although we suspect expanding partnerships with local churches will be helpful, Christian higher education must also continue to explore the opportunities for formation that are unique to their context as well. Through Christ-animated teaching (Glanzer and Alleman, 2019; Smith, 2018; Smith and Smith, 2011) and student affairs (Glanzer et al., 2020), Christian higher education has the ability to promote "formation, not consumption" (Smith, 2009: 41).

When a student's imagination is captured by the Christian narrative and the divine likeness is being restored, it will be made manifest through the development of certain "noble capacities" (Larsen, 2018: 104). These capacities are those skills and virtues which accord with the right worship of God and the loving service of others which is, itself, the covenantal commission of image bearing. Several scholars have studied skills and virtues in ways that align with the vision of success we have outlined here thus far (see Appendix B for a preliminary list), despite the fact that few of them have been included as student success measures thus far. In order to bridge the gap between what is and what should be, administrators of student success at Christian universities will need to incorporate more of these measures into their work. That said, it is important to note that the shift we outline above does not require us to forego all our existing programs, models, or assessments. It is our hope, instead, that we have provided a theological lens through which to see our current programs, models, and assessments. This new sight helps us to remember the image-bearing person which these tools are meant to help *and* ideally uncovers what should matter alongside our rightly ordered institutional priorities. Thus, retention measures need not be excluded, but instead rightly supplemented with measures that help to envision a treasure beyond our institutional contexts.

Conclusion

In this paper, we used the practical theological method to explore the current landscape of student success literature and practice before arguing for a positive theological vision of student success. We are not the first to discuss higher education in light of the Christian story, but in this paper, we contend that far too often scholars and administrators have neglected the riches of the Christian story in their definitions of student success. In light of this lack we proposed that the definition of student success must shift from helping a student find their place within a limited narrative of college-going to finding their place within the expansive and comprehensive narrative of the Christian faith. Although we have largely focused on how to see students rightly, we hope you have also seen the question behind our question—"what does a good student success administrator look

like?" Successful administrators use the right maps and tools by knowing and valuing them (the maps and tools) themselves, but also by seeking to create a culture of Christ-animated student success around their campuses. Our prayer is that Christian administrators of student success would begin actively creating cultures known for their engagement with—and application of—theological thought and language.

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Appendix A

Program assessment toolkit

The greatest danger facing a paper like this is that an administrator will read it, nodding affirmatively along the way, then go about their work the same as they did the day before. To combat this temptation, we have created a program assessment toolkit to help you begin the process of discussing, defining, and implementing a theology of student success. Although this is meant mostly to help you *begin* the process, it is best utilized cyclically, such that once new tools are implemented, you begin the process of discussing and assessing once again.
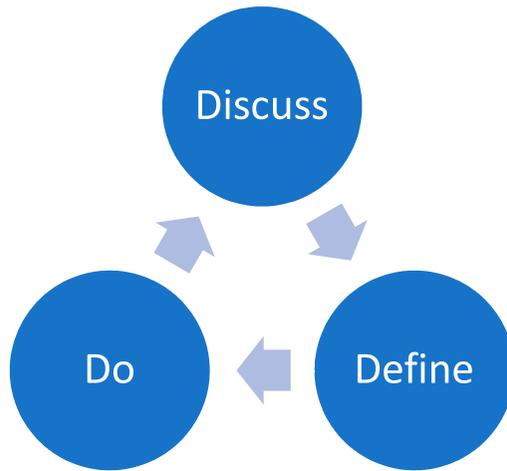
Discuss – Assessing current practice

Whether you are the leader of student success initiatives on your campus or a team member, the first step is to discuss your current student success practices. It could be as simple as gathering a few colleagues together over lunch. Here are a few questions to prompt discussion.

- How do we define success?
  - What do you hope to see in your students at graduation?
  - In what ways have we elevated human constructions of flourishing rather than divinely defined ways of flourishing?
- How do we see students?
  - What aspects of image-bearing are reflected in our view of students? What is missing? (See Appendix B for some categories.)
  - How does our current approach to student success balance institutional priorities with student priorities?
- How do we go about our practice?
  - What do our current programs, models, and measures say about what we value in students?
  - What areas of our student success practice could be transformed by theological sight?

Define – Casting vision for future practice

The next step is beginning to think theologically to cast a vision for future practice. Spend time together discussing and articulating the following:

- How would you redefine student success? What would your theology of student success include?
- What does it mean for students to bear God's image?
- What measures need to be added and what measures need to be dropped from how we assess student success?

Do – Implementing new practices

The final step is determining some possible next steps. As you decide on first steps and the speed at which you move, you will need to be sensitive to your unique institutional context. If you have full buy-in from your executive team you will have a lot of freedom to adjust your success models. If you do not have full buy-in, consider beginning with a single policy change, or by adding a single metric to your model of success. Do not underestimate the power of these "small wins" (Weick, 1984). Weick defines small wins as "concrete, complete, implemented outcome [s] of moderate importance" (p. 43). The point of focusing on small wins is that it attracts less attention while simultaneously building momentum for future proposed changes. With this in mind, here are a few questions to consider as you implement new practices:

- What campus stakeholders will be affected by these changes? What conversations do you need to have before you make the shift?
- With which campus stakeholders could you partner as you go about implementing new practices?
- What are a few "small wins" you could achieve as you begin integrating theological thinking into your definition of student success?

Appendix B

Annotated bibliography

In this paper we broadly defined student success as the adoption of the Christian narrative and thereby the restoration of the divine likeness which includes the cultivation of a new way of seeing (Barron, 1998) and corresponding "noble capacities" (Larsen, 2018: 104). These capacities are those skills and virtues which accord with the right worship of God and the loving service of others which was the covenantal commission associated with the *imago Dei*. If institutions were to adopt the definition of success we outlined in this paper, they will need to consider new ways of measuring success. To aid you in this process, we have compiled a list of possible "noble capacities" to measure as well as the scholars who have studied them in ways that align with the vision of success we have outlined (though not necessarily "Christianly"). The capacities are organized in categories that reflect the various ways students might embody the commission of the *imago Dei*.

Made for purpose

- Developing beyond the Self purposes (Damon et al., 2003)
  - ○ Researchers define what it means to have a purpose. They note the particular benefit of purposes that go beyond one's own achievements and instead contribute to organizations or communities that are bigger than any individual.
- *The Quest for Purpose: The Collegiate Search for a Meaningful Life* (Glanzer et al., 2017b)
  - ○ A national study of students' understanding of meaning and purpose as well as what leads to it.
- *The Purposeful Graduate* (Clydesdale, 2016)
  - ○ An important book that reports on the various aspects of the college experience that help students find purpose and vocation.
- *Living Vocationally* (Wadell and Pinches, 2021)
  - ○ An excellent exploration and application of the Christian roots of "vocation" that reframes the importance of living vocationally today. The authors discuss the importance of discerning our callings as well as a list of virtues needed to live the called life.
- *Educating for Vocation* (Roels, 2017)
  - ○ A recent journal article arguing for the alignment between vocational initiatives and the institution's mission. The article is written by the director of the Network for Vocation in Undergraduate Education (NetVUE) and outlines a number of curricular and co-curricular initiatives employed by NetVUE institutions.

Made for relationship and living in community

- Deeper Life Interaction (Sriram et al., 2020; Sriram and McLevain, 2016a)
  - ○ A host of research has linked faculty-student interaction to student success (traditionally defined). Sriram and colleagues contend that it is important to distinguish between different types of interaction. Sriram et al. suggest that students who talk to adults on campus about meaning and purpose (deeper life interaction) will have the most favorable outcomes.
- The future of residence life in Christian Higher Education (Sriram and McLevain, 2016b)
  - ○ Sriram and McLevain argue that residence life can help reclaim a holistic approach to education.
- *Race on Campus* (Park, 2018)
  - ○ A significant part of living in community is learning about and celebrating God-ordained diversity. Unfortunately, we all hold assumptions about others that inhibit our ability to flourish in community. To help overcome faulty assumptions, Park uses quantitative research to debunk several myths about race on college campuses.
- *Educating Citizens* (Colby et al., 2003)

- ○ Colby and colleagues discuss different models for cultivating a sense of citizenship within students.
- Socially Responsible Leadership (Dugan and Komives, 2010; Johnson and Mincer, 2017; Komives and Wagner, 2017)
  - ○ These resources all center around the *Social Change Model*, which describes organizational change through the interaction between individual, group, and societal values. The leadership scale assesses various qualities of leadership the authors believe facilitate change in light of their model.
- *Educating for Shalom* (Wolterstorff, 2004)
  - ○ This book is a collection of essays by Nicholas Wolterstorff exploring the purpose and function of Christian higher education. Wolterstorff contends that the purpose of Christian higher ed is to cultivate shalom which he describes as a right relationship between humans and God, humans and humans, and humans and nature.

Made for moral excellence

These scholars have found new ways of studying and understanding virtues.

- *Identity in Action* (Glanzer, 2021)
  - ○ Glanzer suggests every person is responsible for multiple identities (e.g., student, friend, son/daughter…), but one does not become excellent in those identities merely by possessing them. He argues, "since we have multiple identities, we must realize that learning to be excellent in each of them often entails undertaking rigorous study and practice."
- Character and moral self-identity (Lapsley and Hardy, 2017; Lapsley, 2008)
  - ○ Recent psychological research has expanded upon—and where necessary critiqued—Kohlberg's model for moral development. Rather than merely progressing through stages of complexity, Lapsley's research suggests that morality is developed as an identity. That is, students may increase in their cognitive complexity, but their moral imagination will only inform their decisions in as much as they have integrated such an imagination into their sense of self. This approach provides a new way of measuring the extent of students' moral development that has been linked to a host of favorable outcomes (including student mental health).
- Patience (Schnitker, 2012; Schnitker and Emmons, 2007); Self-Control (Schnitker et al., 2017; Sriram et al., 2018)
  - ○ Schnitker and colleagues have pioneered new ways of measuring classic virtues.

Made to succeed

- *Thriving on Campus* (Schreiner et al., 2012, 2020)
  - ○ This book (and its recently published second edition) represent a strengths-based approach to student success and retention efforts. The authors present several

studies about what leads students to thrive academically, interpersonally, and intrapersonally in college contexts.

Additional resources on the mission of Christian Higher Education

- *Restoring the Soul of the University: Unifying Christian Higher Education in a Fragmented Age* (Glanzer et al., 2017a)
  - This is a must-read text for any Christian working in higher education today. The book traces the history of theological thinking in higher education in a way that describes how we've arrived at the fragmented nature of our present reality. In the final third of the book, the authors offer illuminating and practical recommendations for every area of the university.
- *The Idea of a Christian College* (Holmes, 1987) and *The Idea of a Christian College: A Reexamination for Today's University* (Ream and Glanzer, 2013)
  - Both Holmes's original and Ream and Glanzer's rearticulation of the idea of a Christian college apply robust theological thinking to the life and practices of Christian colleges and universities.
- *Why College Matters to God* (Ostrander, 2012)
  - An introduction (aimed at students) to the purposes and goals of a Christian college education. After tracing a brief history of higher education, the book helps students place their experiences within the framework of redemptive history.