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Committing to the Common Good: Reframing Student Success Using Catholic Social Teaching

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Reframing Student Success Using Catholic Social Teaching

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Introduction

This case study examines how the role of Student Success Librarian (SSL) at University of Dayton's (UD) Roesch Library incorporates Catholic Social Teaching in order to achieve the mission of this faith-based institution. Students at UD are asked to sign a Commitment to Community, a list of pledges which share similar values to the themes of Catholic Social Teaching. By focusing on the intersection of the Commitment to Community, diversity, equity, and inclusion (DE&I), and Catholic Social Teaching themes, the SSL at UD's Roesch Library is able to incorporate Catholic Social Teaching in its programming, services, and partnerships.

Literature Review

At first glance, the concept of student success is a simple one. Students attend classes, receive grades as an indicator of their performance, and, ideally, complete their degrees. Sometimes, measures of student success are viewed strictly as a student's performance in the classroom. Individuals working in roles focused on student success often look to retention and persistence data as a measure of success. Kuh et al., clearly state in their 2006 review of the literature that "many consider degree attainment to be the definitive measure of student success."[1]

Kuh et al.'s literature review points to academic achievement as an indicator of success, with strong achievement in the first year acting as an indicator of dropout probability and likelihood of timely degree completion. This review does point to several other factors that contribute to a student's likelihood of being retained—or of dropping out: "Of the 45 percent of students who start college and fail to complete their degree, less than one-quarter are dismissed for poor academic performance. Most leave for other reasons,"[2] such as psychological or economic issues or a lack of dedicated resources for underserved populations. The idea that academic achievement is not the only predictor of degree attainment is not a new one. In 1975, Vincent Tinto's "theoretical synthesis of recent research" presented a schema

that illustrates academic achievement as only half of the equation when it comes to student success. Tinto's schema points to external commitments, engagement, and a feeling of social integration as contributing factors to success.[3]

The concept of a more holistic view on student success persists today, with even more nuanced takes on student engagement and its impact. Bowden, Tickle, and Naumann propose a concept of a more complex version of engagement which takes into account student wellbeing, self-efficacy, and transformative learning processes. Bowden, Tickle, and Naumann go on to emphasize the need to focus on engagement opportunities which "operate interdependently to shape student and institutional success outcomes."[4] However, recent examinations of the library's impact on student success often remain rooted in success metrics which focus on academic achievement. Wright's 2021 assessment of the impact of library instruction on student success makes a point to separate retention and academic achievement from student success, citing classroom engagement as another factor of success.[5] Yet ultimately, improved retention and academic achievement remain the goal of many assessments. Santiago et al. explored the impact of the academic library on student success outside of the classroom by conducting an environmental scan of five out-of-class programs sponsored by the library. However, the metrics used for assessing student success largely focused on retention, degree attainment, and career success.[6] Agasiti et al.'s investigation of success factors for socioeconomically disadvantaged students elaborates on promoting resilience among members of underserved populations. However, standardized test scores remain at the heart of the measures of success.[7] When it comes to student success, academic achievement remains a prominent measure, with engagement being viewed largely as a contributing factor to academic achievement, not as a measure of success in and of itself. But what does student success look like for institutions with missions that extend beyond the attainment of a degree?

Student Success at a Catholic Institution

The University of Dayton (UD) is a mid-sized private university in Dayton, Ohio. It is a Catholic university founded by the Society of Mary in 1850 and Marianist values are incorporated into its mission and identity. On its website, UD is described as "a diverse community committed, in the Marianist tradition, to educating the whole person and linking learning and scholarship with leadership and service."[8] This idea of educating the whole person can be used to develop a holistic view of student success. While academic achievement and degree attainment are certainly a part of this education, so are many intangible elements, like ingraining within students the values of service and community. The measure of a student's success under this mission goes beyond student retention. Instead, the student success efforts of an institution must be driven by something rooted in the very values it is meant to instill. While students at UD are held to a high standard of academic success, they are also required to sign a pledge of Commitment to Community, or "C2C." This pledge highlights three distinct commitments:

1. The commitment to learning in and through community
2. The commitment to respect every person in thought, word, and action
3. The commitment to practice solidarity in order to promote the common good

The C2C is explicitly designed to engage the "intellectual, spiritual, religious, moral, physical, and social dimensions of the educational community."[9] When compared to less holistic measures of student success, which may focus solely on academic achievement and degree attainment, the education UD aims to offer extends far beyond these parameters. Institutions hoping to engage with students on a moral and social level, as well as an academic one, may find that incorporating the values of Catholic Social Teaching into curriculum, services, and programs helps to achieve these goals.

In 2018, UD's Roesch Library hired its first SSL, a position designed to focus on bolstering campus support for underserved and underrepresented students across campus. The SSL acts as liaison between the library and student support services across campus, informing library faculty and staff of trends in student success and collaborating externally to develop programs and services to bolster support. Much of the existing literature examining the relationship between libraries and student success often uses the same measures of success described above–namely retention, and degree attainment.[10]

The SSL at UD works with the library's internal teams–such as the Diversity and Inclusion Team, the Marketing and Outreach Team, the Assessment Team, and the Research and Instruction Teams, along with other departments across campus such as the Center for International Programs and the Multi-Ethnic Education and Engagement Center. After working with these student-centered units and observing that library services and programming were largely geared towards academic success measures, the SSL discerned the need for a more holistic approach to shaping student success efforts. Given UD's mission, he concluded that Catholic Social Teaching should be considered a key component of approaches to student success.

Catholic Social Teaching

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) outlines seven key themes in Catholic Social Teaching. These themes are:

1. Life and dignity of the human person
2. Call to family, community, and participation
3. Rights and responsibilities
4. Option for the poor and vulnerable
5. The dignity of work and the rights of workers
6. Solidarity
7. Care for God's creation[11]

While these themes are not a comprehensive examination of Catholic Social Teaching, they offer a succinct summation of social values and commitments important to Catholic living. These themes very clearly dovetail with the pledges made by students at UD when signing the C2C. Contributing to, and being a part of, the community, acting in solidarity, and caring for the well-being of others regardless of difference are standout through-lines when the two are compared. By identifying these three common tenets between the Commitment to Community and themes of Catholic Social Teaching and using them as a blueprint, the SSL has been able to shape their role in a way that is meaningful for the library, the university, and its students.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

In working to support underrepresented and underserved student populations, the SSL at UD continuously seeks opportunities to learn how to be an advocate. Allyship is a continuous process that is constantly changing and evolving. Catholic Social Teaching serves as a guiding force for student success initiatives. This works best in conjunction with techniques and approaches learned from training focused on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DE&I), particularly because Catholic Social Teaching's emphasis on the dignity of the human person aligns itself with many DE&I practices. For instance, the SSL is a member of UD's Dialogue Facilitators Cohort, a two-semester program training individuals to facilitate dialogue on difficult topics. Techniques like active listening, identifying and naming emotions, and challenging dominant narratives are invaluable in the process of establishing community and understanding differences. Similarly, regular and consistent education on antiracism, critical race theory, sexual violence prevention, and LGBTQ+ allyship help develop an informed approach to creating a sense of solidarity. Catholic Social Teaching is used as a framework in student success initiatives, with continued education on oppressive systems and institutional barriers helping to create an inclusive and nuanced approach to a sensitive and urgent area of work. It is through exploring the intersection of Catholic Social Teaching and DE&I that the SSL has been able to implement holistic approaches to student success.

Using Catholic Social Teaching as a Foundation for Student Success Initiatives

The SSL in this case study established intentions for working along the three common themes identified earlier within the first few months of being hired. A series of blog posts were posted to the library website highlighting identities and barriers of which some students, faculty, and staff may not have been aware. By writing posts focusing on library anxiety, being overwhelmed by the size of campus,[12] and the fear of asking for help researching sensitive or controversial topics,[13] the SSL made clear that student success work within the library would include identifying and bringing to the forefront barriers faced by students of all backgrounds and identities. These posts prompted positive interactions between the SSL and library employees, with ten faculty/staff expressing an interest in learning more about barriers faced by underrepresented students. From there, it became clear that a commitment to these three tenets—community, solidarity, and understanding of difference—would be essential jumping off points in working towards students' success. Each of the following initiatives was created to focus on these three tenets, which align with the three components of the Commitment to Community, as well as three Catholic Social Teaching values: dignity of the human person, community, and solidarity.

Multi-Ethnic Education and Engagement

In beginning this work, the SSL hoped to become familiar with existing communities on campus and to learn how the University Libraries could best support them. The SSL reached out to the Multi-Ethnic Engagement and Education Center (MEC) to express interest as a campus partner. The SSL established office hours in the MEC Family Room, a student lounge used by students to socialize, study, and relax. It is important to note that the MEC Family Room is a space open to all students, but is primarily a resource for multicultural and BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) students. As a white man, the SSL recognized that entering a space created by a department designed to support students of color and treating it as his own would run counter to the goal of respecting and supporting existing community spaces on campus. The initial goal for office hours was simply to establish an unobtrusive and consistent presence in the Family Room. Although initial engagement with students was minimal, over the course of the second semester of office hours, the SSL engaged students in conversations about topics of interest, offered advice, and built a rapport with many of the Family Room users. Some students recognized the SSL during library instruction sessions or at other events on campus, while others began to approach the SSL during MEC office hours to ask for research help, or to schedule appointments for research help in the library at a later date. In addition, the SSL was invited to give a presentation on library services at a

student-run mentorship program hosted by MEC. The SSL was also invited to participate in a Multicultural Overnight event, meeting with prospective students and their families to share examples of the opportunities students at UD have to connect with one another to develop a shared sense of community.

Establishing office hours led to the SSL's regular invitation to campus partner meetings with MEC, allowing for a better understanding of existing support services for students and how student needs might differ based on student identities. The SSL was able to relay these services and needs back to the University Libraries, which became particularly useful when conversations shifted to designing instruction sessions to be more inclusive and accessible. The most valuable aspect of the partnership with MEC was experiencing firsthand what it means to be a part of a community. Experiencing the openness of the students and staff of MEC, participating in events, and even receiving support from students helped the SSL to see what it means to live in community, and to gain a better understanding of the institutional mission. Hearing from MEC staff and students offered some anecdotal evidence that these initiatives were having their desired effect. While conducting instruction sessions, the SSL regularly encountered students with whom he had engaged during office hours. Similarly, the SSL was able to connect with students in the MEC Family Room that had received instruction from the SSL. Students sometimes followed up via email thanking the SSL for offering office hours, and the SSL was awarded recognition at the annual MEC Recognition Dinner for their work with MEC and its staff and students. This experience helped to ground the SSL's later student success efforts in the themes of Catholic Social Teaching, particularly in regards to working to develop a sense of solidarity with other underrepresented and underserved populations.

International Students

Working with these themes in mind, it was important for the SSL not only to create space and support for diverse communities on campus, but also to understand the rich differences among students within the larger campus community, how these differences can contribute to success, and how to eliminate institutional barriers that treat differences as deficits. One group of students this has been especially true for was international students.

The SSL's initial work with international students began with restructuring a portion of their orientation program, specifically a presentation on academic integrity. While initial conversations on academic integrity focused on the issues as a binary moral one—listing examples of what is "right" against examples of what is "wrong"—the SSL felt that this could serve to alienate international students whose cultural values aligned with the "wrong" examples given. The presentation was reworked to focus on the idea of academic integrity as it relates to a culture's values. Students were presented not only with definitions of academic integrity, but the cultural values behind it. More importantly, it was acknowledged that concepts of academic integrity differ around the world, and that students are not "wrong" or "bad" for being used to doing things differently. One activity used in the orientation program included students partnering up with a peer to discuss American values of academic integrity. Students were prompted to explore how these values might be different from what they were used to, and how they might be the same. By encouraging dialogue between students in which academic integrity is presented as a cultural difference and not a judgment, the program shifted from potentially "othering"

international students to bolstering the idea that they themselves and their cultural values are an important part of the campus community. This activity encouraged students to think critically about the values of the cultures of their peers and where their own values might fit amongst them, an essential part of fulfilling the C2C.

This work has continued in the classroom with instruction sessions for the Intensive English Program (IEP), a course for students who are studying to pass their language qualifying exams. While previously a more research-intensive session, the SSL changed course, focusing instead on emphasizing the fact that the library is a space for all students to feel welcome, and highlighting resources and services which may be useful to them, reinforcing a sense of ownership of the space that many domestic students may already have. This sense of ownership is crucial for students who may struggle to feel as though they were a part of the campus community. Another way the SSL has worked to develop a sense of solidarity for these students has been to list examples of questions, struggles, and barriers faced by students of all backgrounds. Most significantly, sharing the fact that students who speak English as their primary language often struggle with fully understanding academic journal articles has seemed to put these students at ease. When teaching that this is a barrier shared by students of all backgrounds and identities, IEP students have often expressed surprise initially, then relief that they are not alone in facing these issues. This idea of a shared struggle with their domestic counterparts offers international students a better understanding of their peers, along with a sense of community. After conferring with internal teams and the instructor of the IEP course, it has become a requirement for IEP students to meet with a librarian as part of their research assignment. The SSL regularly communicates with research librarians about the assignment and its requirements, along with the issues or concerns faced by IEP students, to ensure that students feel comfortable asking for help, and that they complete the course understanding that they are able to use library resources as any member of the community would.

First-Generation Students

Another example of incorporating these themes into student success work is the SSL's work with the population of first-generation (often shortened to "first-gen") college students on campus. After working with a group on campus to analyze student retention data, a clear trend emerged: first-generation students were being retained less than their continuing-generation counterparts. To address this widening gap, the SSL led efforts to form the First-Gen Success Team (FGST), a campus-wide committee dedicated to bolstering support for first-gen students. As chair of the FGST, the SSL first focused on developing a greater understanding of the first-gen experience. This understanding was essential for creating a sense of solidarity among first-gen students. Through open dialogues, article reads, and sharing personal

experiences, the First-Gen Success Team identified two major goals which could make UD a more welcoming space for first-gen students. The first goal was to develop a definition of "first-generation" that was more flexible and inclusive than traditional definitions. The university had previously used FAFSA information to identify first-generation students–those who did not have a parent or guardian with a four-year degree were considered first-generation, and those who did were considered continuing-generation. The FGST chose to include students who met any of the following criteria:

1. Anyone who is first in their family to attend college or whose parents did not graduate with a bachelor's degree.

2. Anyone who has siblings in college but whose parents did not earn a bachelor's degree.

3. Any community member who self-identifies as having had limited exposure to the college-going experience.

The second goal for the FGST was to create a sense of community among first-gen students, between first-gen students and continuing-generation students, and between first-gen students and the university as a whole. In order to do this, the FGST developed a perpetual calendar of programming for first-gen students, including an ice cream social, celebration of National First-Gen Day, and a series of workshops focused on topics such as financial aid, career services, and mentorship, topics about which continuing-generation students could seek help from a parent or guardian. While attendance at these events has been less than desired, the development of the calendar of events will allow the FGST to focus on marketing and assessment in the future. The FGST also plans to strengthen the first-gen community on campus by surveying faculty and staff who self-identify as first-gen. By listing first-gen liaisons in various departments across campus, the FGST hopes to communicate to students that they are not alone in their experiences, and to encourage them to come together with first-generation faculty, staff, and peers in solidarity and community.

After developing a comprehensive definition and creating a calendar of events for first-gen students, the FGST has now turned its focus to the rest of the campus community. The FGST is currently focused on developing professional development opportunities for faculty and staff to better understand the experience of first-generation college students in order to better support them. For example, the FGST hosted an event in UD's Dialogue Zone, a space designed for facilitating difficult conversations, on what it means to be a first-generation college student at an institution that enrolls a majority of continuing-generation students. The FGST also recognizes the importance of teaching students of all backgrounds about the experiences of others, and hopes to implement programming for students to help them better understand first-gen identities. Developing this common understanding is important not only to create a sense of belonging for first-generation students, but also for continuing-generation students to achieve the level of success for which the university strives.

Conclusion

Student success can look very different when institutions adopt a more holistic view. Using elements of Catholic Social Teaching as a guide, the focus of student success initiatives organically expands beyond academic achievement and retention to include engagement as a major outcome. This more subjective outlook makes quantifying and assessing student success more difficult, but gauging students' feeling of belonging and support, their sense of community and solidarity, and their understanding and acceptance of others' differences could prove worthwhile. By incorporating social values into their work, libraries can better align their goals with the mission of their universities, and set students up to succeed as people, not just as students. In the case of the SSL at the UD, using themes from Catholic Social Teaching—community, solidarity, and understanding—allowed for a broader support system that interlocked with the university's mission, along with the student pledge, the Commitment to Community, and the university's commitment to inclusive and equitable values. This outlook on student success leads to a holistic approach that values not just degree completion, but the ability of a university to support students as they seek to understand their own values and those of their peers. This perspective offers broader implications for the meaning of "success" at institutions of all kinds, including the need for stronger support networks unrelated to academic achievement and using a diverse array of metrics to truly determine whether or not a student is succeeding. ∎

Zachary Lewis is the Student Success Librarian at the University of Dayton's Roesch Library. Lewis's research interests focus on how student success is measured, and how these measures impact an institution's ability to support underrepresented student populations, particularly first-generation college students.

Endnotes

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