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# **Defining and Achieving Success: Perspectives from Students at Catholic Women's Colleges**

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*This paper explores the concept of success, as defined through interviews with 26 senior students at two Catholic women's colleges in the Midwestern United States. Participants described success in expansive ways, grouped into five themes: (a) success is subjective and internally defined, (b) success involves finding a balance between work and family, (c) success involves contributing to a community, (d) successful women are goal-oriented, and (e) successful women do not impede their own success. The findings suggest that if college leaders are to help develop "successful" women graduates, they must listen to how their students define success.*

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## Defining and Achieving Success: Perspectives from Students at Catholic Women's Colleges

Educational researchers in the United States have provided evidence to establish that, on a variety of measures, women's college graduates are more successful than their peers graduating from coeducational institutions. For example, women's college graduates are more likely to earn doctorates and be listed in *Who's Who of American Women* than female graduates from coeducational institutions (Tidball, Smith, Tidball, & Wolf-Wendel, 1999). In addition, women's college graduates obtain more prestigious jobs and higher salaries than their peers educated at coeducational institutions (Riordan, 1994).

The measures of success used in evaluating women's colleges and their graduates are nearly always related to educational attainment, occupational attainment, and income, yet these measures are not the only ways in which success can be defined. The evidence we present in this paper provides support for alternative definitions of success, described by women who attend Catholic women's colleges in the United States. We believe that both women and men deserve college experiences that help them develop their internal definitions of success and give them the skills to achieve success according to those definitions. We suggest that if college leaders are to help students become successful according to the students' own definitions, they must look beyond current literature to listen to how women students define success. It is important that college leaders pay attention to students' conceptions of success in order to foster students' satisfaction with their college experiences and their future commitments to their alma maters.

### Literature Review

Knowledge that informs this inquiry is focused in three areas of research: (a) women's colleges, including Catholic women's colleges; (b) factors influencing women's life choices related to work, family, and identity; and (c) success, with literature coming from multiple scholarly fields, including management, psychology, sociology, and women's studies.

### Women's Colleges

Literature related to women's colleges most often compares them with coeducational institutions. Many studies focus on women's experiences, perceptions, choices, and aspirations while in college (Bank, 2003; Harwarth, Maline, & DeBra, 1997; Kim & Alvarez, 1995; Kinzie, Thomas, Palmer, Umbach, & Kuh, 2007; Miller-Bernal & Poulson, 2006; Smith,

Wolf, & Morrison, 1995; Solnick, 1995; Tidball et al., 1999). Researchers have found that attendance at a women's college relates positively to the quality of students' academic experiences and students' perceived changes in skills and abilities (Kim & Alvarez, 1995; Smith, 1990). In several studies, women's college students reported higher levels of feelings of support and more positive perceptions of institutional concern for student development and growth (Kinzie et al., 2007; Smith et al., 1995). Further, in their synthesis of research on how college impacts students, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) found evidence suggesting that single-sex colleges enhance women's socioeconomic and career aspirations.

Many other studies support the idea that women's colleges have a positive impact on the educational and occupational achievement of women (Harwarth et al., 1997; Oates & Williamson, 1978; Riordan, 1994; Tidball et al., 1999). Several researchers have found that women attending women's colleges are more likely to earn advanced degrees than their peers at coeducational institutions (Smith, 1990; Tidball et al., 1999). Riordan (1994) found that women's college attendees achieve higher occupational prestige and earn significantly higher salaries than women educated in coeducational contexts, even though the women's college alumnae in his sample reported working fewer hours per week than the alumnae of coeducational institutions. Some scholars disagree about the positive effects of attending a women's college, however, attributing the achievement of women's college graduates to only a few very prestigious women's colleges (Oakes & Williamson, 1978). Other work questions whether women's college experiences influence students' interests and attitudes, or whether women who select women's colleges and coeducational institutions have different expectations and goals from the start (Lentz, 1980).

Although findings are somewhat mixed, significant positive effects of attending a women's college are noted in multiple studies (e.g., Kim & Alvarez, 1995; Riordan, 1994; Smith, 1990; Solnick, 1995; Tidball et al., 1999), and women's college graduates are often deemed more successful than women educated in coeducational contexts. As in the examples above, that success is frequently measured along educational and occupational lines. None of the studies cited above provide rationales for choosing these definitions of success as opposed to others that may be related to overall well-being or satisfaction.

Although several researchers have specifically studied Catholic women's colleges (McCarthy, 1989; Poulson & Higgins, 2003; Schier & Russett, 2002), these institutions are often ignored in larger studies of women's colleges. This is a weakness in the literature, since researchers note that Catholic colleges differ from other institutions in their history,

values, and goals. According to McCarthy (1989), Catholic women's colleges were founded to improve society through the education of women, and they differ from other institutions in their commitment to service and their global outlook. The Catholic Church also holds particular perspectives related to women's roles in church and society (Hesse-Biber & Leckenby, 2003; Poulson & Higgins, 2003). While there is no single way in which Catholic colleges understand and actualize their Catholic missions, Catholic culture has generally remained conservative with regard to gender roles (Morey & Piderit, 2006; Schier & Russett, 2002). Catholic women's colleges, and the women who attend them, may also perceive success differently, given these institutions' religious perspectives.

### **Factors Influencing Women's Life Choices**

Many factors influence how women position themselves within the world and plan to negotiate their future roles. Scholars have explored women's moral development (Baxter Magolda, 2004; Gilligan, 1982) and identity development processes (Josselson, 1987) and suggested that women's development differs from men's development in significant ways. For example, women are more likely than men to define their world in the context of their relationships with others, in a way that is empathetic and emotionally connected to others (Gilligan, 1982). Relatedness (rather than individuality) is a cornerstone of many women's identities, and women are more likely than men to be satisfied with an identity development pathway that leads them back to their parents' belief and value systems (Josselson, 1987). Women's individual identities and psychological growth, therefore, are intimately linked to their social consciousness and context (Zaytoun, 2006).

Research from multiple disciplines suggests that college-educated women face difficult decisions regarding their professional and personal paths. Balancing various goals and roles involves complex identity negotiation processes which are shaped by educational experiences as well as social norms and expectations (Neumann & Peterson, 1997; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Ropers-Huilman, 2000). Many women struggle to meet both internal and external expectations about how women should participate in society as both family members and employed workers (Bolton, 2000; Hochschild, 1989, 1997; Simon, 1995; Williams, 2001). Women's identity development processes and the well-documented challenges facing women as they make decisions about their professional and personal paths likely influence their goals and their understandings of what constitutes success.

## Success

Different disciplines make different assumptions about what success means for women, and assumptions within disciplines have changed over time. Earlier studies considered career success from the organizational point of view and used rather narrow standards of evaluation, focusing on criteria like income level and job title (Gould & Penley, 1984; Veiga, 1983). More recent studies have considered individuals' views of career success and found the definitions to be subjective and dependent upon personal characteristics (Dyke & Murphy, 2006; Peluchette, 1993; Sturges, 1999).

In one study considering individuals' view of career success, Peluchette (1993) surveyed 424 full-time faculty members at two American research institutions and found that individual difference, family, and organization variables such as self-esteem, sense of competence, multiple role stress, resource availability, and networking influenced participants' definitions of subjective career success. Peluchette's study did not, however, find variables such as gender, marital status, and family size to be significant factors in professors' definitions of success, perhaps because her sample was 72% men. Additionally, this study did not include key variables such as age, race and ethnicity, or social class. Peluchette called for more research about how variables such as gender play a part in subjective career success.

Subsequent research has shown that gender is a mediator in job satisfaction among faculty members, though findings remain mixed (Hagedorn, 2000). Research also supports the concepts of relatedness and personal and professional balance as being central to women's identities and essential to women's satisfaction and definitions of success. Using autobiographical accounts written by women educators, Ropers-Huilman (2000) posited that many women faculty members are likely to derive satisfaction from working toward social change, engaging in teaching and learning relationships, developing quality relationships with colleagues and collaborators, and constructing coherent personal and professional identities. These findings suggest that the ways women faculty members subjectively define career success are consistent with Gilligan's (1982) assertion that relationships tend to be central to women's self-definitions.

Research with working adults in the United States (Dyke & Murphy, 2006) and the United Kingdom (Sturges, 1999) found that women's definitions of success often focused on a personal desire for an emphasis on relationships. Sturges found that:

The women's definitions of career success also tended to be "broader" than the men's: they were likely to describe career

success as just one part of the success they wanted to achieve in their lives as a whole, and therefore were more inclined to talk about an interest in succeeding in other parts of their life [sic] as a whole. This was often expressed in terms of balance being part of their definition of career success. (p. 248)

Men in Sturges' study were less likely to indicate a desire for balance and more likely to be driven by external criteria. Material success was also more important to men's definitions (Dyke & Murphy, 2006).

While most success research has been conducted with working adults, including those studies cited above, findings from the Cooperative Institutional Research Program Freshman Survey give insight into the life objectives of college students in the United States. Data from this long-running survey indicate that men and women college students' life objectives have changed slightly in the last decade (Almanac of Higher Education, 1997-1998, 2007-2008). First-year college men in fall 2006 were less likely to indicate that being very well-off financially was an essential or very important life objective than first-year college men in fall 1996 (74.6% versus 76.4%). Women's opinions on the matter stayed about the same between fall 1996 and fall 2006 (72.2% versus 72.4%). Both men and women entering college in fall 2006 were less likely than those in 1996 to indicate that becoming an authority in their field was an essential or very important life objective (59.9% versus 66.2% for men and 56.7% versus 62.3% for women). In contrast, life objectives like raising a family and helping others in difficulty increased in importance for both men and women. Raising a family was an essential or very important life objective for 74.7% of men and 76.1% of women in fall 2006, compared to 72.3% of men and 72.1% of women in fall 1996. In fall 2006, it was the top rated objective among men and women. Similarly, helping others who are in difficulty was an essential or very important life objective for 58.9% of men and 73.1% of women in fall 2006, compared to 53.4% of men and 69.8% of women in fall 1996. These data indicate that women's and men's life objectives—and perhaps definitions of life success—have changed over time.

Popular literature reinforces documentation of a shift in the definition of success for both men and women away from career success and external indicators like salary and job title. For a 1993 issue of *Working Woman*, "Redefining Success" (Kagan, 1993; O'Toole, 1993), the Roper Organization polled 1,027 adults about their definition of life success and their satisfaction with their lives. The poll found that Americans' life satisfaction was at an all-time high in fall 1992, despite difficult economic times (Kagan, 1993). It also found that "people who call themselves

very satisfied have a much less traditional, more people-oriented view of success than those who say they're somewhat or very dissatisfied" (Kagan, 1993, p. 55). Men were more likely to see wealth as a success symbol than women (32% versus 21%), especially men under 25 years old. Women in every age group were more likely than men to say that they would rather make the world better than earn a lot of money.

In summary, existing literature shows that the issues of satisfaction and success for women are related to their relationships with others. In many cases, women focus on their identities as workers, partners, community members, and mothers. Performing and valuing these multiple roles leads to a complex definition of success which is subjective and dependent on personal characteristics. Career accomplishment is only one part of this definition, which emphasizes balance and relationships across multiple aspects of life. This definition is not reflected in the measures of success typically used to evaluate and laud women's college graduates.

In addition, most of the academic and popular success research cited above was conducted among working adult women. But how do traditionally college-aged women, on the cusp of their adult life, define success as they plan for their futures? College students' ideas of success are largely missing from the success literature, especially success as seen through the eyes of women college students at Catholic institutions. Through this study we attempt to fill that gap. Interviews with students at two Catholic women's colleges yielded rich data about how these women defined success and how they learned to meet those definitions. Through an analysis of these data we center students' definitions.

## Methods

Qualitative research allows researchers to understand the meanings people have constructed about their experiences in the world (Merriam, 1998). It occurs in context, and attempts to understand phenomena holistically, instead of as discrete parts identified as variables. A major characteristic of all qualitative research is that "*the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis*. Data are mediated through this human instrument" (Merriam, 1998, p. 7, original emphasis). Therefore, researchers' positions in relation to their research are vitally important to understanding both research processes and findings.

As an alumna of a Catholic women's college, I (Kathryn) was personally interested in learning more about the way that these types of colleges shape women's identities and conceptions of success. I had been shaped by my undergraduate experience in a way that I could not articulate fully, and I wanted to learn more about that process. Certainly my own



experience at a Catholic women's college shaped my interpretations of participants' experiences. My identity as a Catholic woman and a student also enriched this research by providing an interpretation of participants' responses that may have been missed by a more removed observer.

I (Rebecca) grew up in a Catholic household and attended a Catholic elementary school but am not a practicing Catholic. My interest in this study came from a place of curiosity and intrigue. Having spent fifteen years engaging in research and inquiry related to women's experiences in postsecondary education, I was aware of how women's colleges were noted for graduating successful women. Yet, I remained skeptical of both the gender segregation that occurs in women's colleges and the ways in which Catholicism limited women's choices, experiences, and leadership potential. In what ways could women's empowerment truly happen at Catholic women's colleges? My commitment to improving women's education drove my involvement in this research and informed both the questions and the findings.

### **Procedure**

The data informing this research were gathered from interviews and focus groups conducted in spring 2008 with 26 seniors at two Catholic women's colleges in the Midwestern United States. Founded by separate women's religious orders in the early twentieth century, the colleges retain ties with the founding monastic communities adjacent to their campuses. Both institutions are committed to women's liberal arts education in the Catholic tradition, as reflected in their mission statements.

The missions of these Catholic women's colleges have many similarities, but the institutions also differ in important ways. One institution, located in a rural community, offers only baccalaureate degree programs. It enrolls more than 2,000 women in traditional full-time day programs. It maintains an academic partnership with a nearby men's university, an arrangement that allows students to register for classes on either campus. Nearly all of this institution's courses enroll both men and women. The other institution serves more than 5,200 students on two campuses in a large metropolitan area. About 2,000 of those students are enrolled in a traditional women-only day program to earn a baccalaureate degree. This institution also enrolls weekend students in various baccalaureate degree programs and offers professional certificates; associate's, bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees; and continuing education opportunities for both men and women. The college has an agreement with several nearby private coeducational institutions which allows for cross-registration among colleges, but undergraduate day classes at this institution remain predominantly female.

To find students at these institutions who were likely to consider a substantial professional role upon graduation, participants were selected from a pool of students who had indicated on a first-year student survey that they intended to receive a graduate or professional degree in their lifetime. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants using a protocol that focused on the overarching question: How do students at Catholic women's colleges construct their identities? Participants selected their own pseudonyms which were used throughout the research. Institutional Review Board approval was obtained from both women's colleges and from the University of Minnesota.

In the interviews, all but one of the participants identified as White. All participants were in their early twenties. Most of the participants perceived their families to be in the socioeconomic middle class, although students seemed to have a fairly expansive definition of "middle class." Religious affiliation of participants varied. Over half of the participants (15) self-identified as Catholic, while other participants identified as Lutheran, Protestant, and agnostic. Participants reported a variety of majors. This group was not meant to represent the populations of women attending these particular colleges or Catholic women's colleges as a whole, but rather was meant to be a sub-section of women at Catholic women's colleges with aspirations to obtain a graduate or professional degree at some point in their lifetime. We speculate that this group may have considered multiple facets of their lives as they defined success for themselves and others.

All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed in full by the researchers. Each study participant was given the opportunity to review the transcript of her interview to ensure it reflected her intended responses. Additionally, we convened two focus groups of these participants (one at each institution) to engage in a process of member-checking. Eleven women participated in these discussions.

This article concentrates on students' definitions of success, one aspect of the rich and expansive information gained from the interviews and focus groups. Students' responses were organized into eight initial categories, and then condensed into five themes described below.

### **Findings**

The participants had a variety of ideas about what success meant for women in general and what it meant for them personally. Students' responses can be grouped into five themes:

1. Success is subjective and internally defined.
2. Success involves finding a balance between work and family.
3. Success involves contributing to a community.

4. Successful women are goal-oriented.
5. Successful women do not impede their own success.

Many of the responses from participants support several of the themes. We discuss each of the themes below.

### **Success Is Subjective and Internally Defined**

The theme that success is subjective and internally defined was the most prevalent among participants in this study. Most were clear that success was defined individually and could not be generalized for all women. Personal happiness was a key element of these definitions of success. As Christina said:

I think to really achieve success it isn't necessarily how far a woman got in her career or how well they raised their family. It is more about how they feel about themselves and how they feel about their own satisfaction with their life—like did they do the things they wanted to do, do they feel happy, do they feel like they were given opportunities, and they didn't feel like they let anyone cut themselves short or anything.

Participants in this study noted that students' internal definitions of success could be in conflict with what society values. Sophia said:

I realized for a long time that I don't think of success as wealth or prestige or having one of those jobs that fits into a category that you know is good. And I sort of struggle with that because society pushes certain things at you; you should be a lawyer or a doctor or a professor even sort of fits in that "good" category.... I sort of naturally distrust that. I want to ... look for something else that I could be happy in.

Similarly, Riya described a successful woman as "somebody who is doing what they want to do with their lives and isn't giving in to too much pressure about what the world says is successful."

Students often defined success for women generally and then shared their own internal definition. Their personal priorities showed more clearly when we asked them to project fifty years in the future and imagine a celebration honoring their lives. We asked each participant what she would want people to say about the life she lived. Although this question did not ask specifically about success, students gave answers that articulated their ideal. Some students wanted to be acknowledged for their career, and others wanted to be remembered for their role in the family. Others wanted to integrate their personal and professional lives, as addressed in the theme below related to finding a balance between work and family.

Even as participants expressed career, educational, and personal goals for themselves, they defended women who did not have the same intentions. Many interviewees asserted that successful women can be stay-at-home mothers or full-time career women, even if those options did not constitute their personal plan for success. Participants seemed to be defining success in a way expansive enough to include themselves and their women friends and family members. Several listed examples of people in their lives that they did not want to exclude from their definition of success, even as they acknowledged that these people may not be viewed as successful in traditional terms. Participants stressed that these women were successful given their subjective and internal definitions of the concept of success.

### **Success Involves Finding a Balance Between Work and Family**

Many of the participants in this study mentioned that success involves finding a personal balance between work and family. This theme is consistent with research findings among mature career women (Sturges, 1999). Students perceived balance as inherent to their definitions of success because many of them had expressed multiple career, educational, and personal goals.

Again, students stressed that balance was internally defined by each individual. Some women planned to balance work and family together; others planned to concentrate on either career or family at particular times in their lives. Participants in this study described all personal definitions of balance as successful as long as the individual was happy with the situation. Rose even expanded her definition of success to include women who had not altogether achieved balance between work and family: "I think it is hard, but a successful woman can juggle those two. Even if you don't juggle them very well, I think you would still be successful just by even attempting."

Most participants in this study were less concerned about future work and family balance than we expected. This finding is inconsistent with current literature suggesting that college-educated women wrestle with decisions associated with their professional and personal paths (Bolton, 2000; Hochschild, 1989, 1997; Simon, 1995; Williams, 2001). While participants reported ambitious educational, career, and personal goals, they seemed relatively unconcerned about how those goals would coexist or conflict in the future. They seemed confident that they would be able to prioritize and accept trade-offs. They also predicted that they would be in economic positions that would enable a wide range of professional and personal choices.

The availability of women role models who were balancing work and family may have helped the interviewees envision balance in their own lives, and thus calmed their concerns for the future. Participants named

a number of college faculty and staff role models who seemed able to balance their personal and professional lives successfully. Students used words and phrases like “balance” and “having it all” to describe their role models’ personal and professional lives. As one participant noted in a focus group discussion, “I have had several professors that have families and it seems to work out pretty well for them.”

Yet another interpretation might be that the participants in this study had not yet considered realistically the hardships faced by women trying to “do it all.” In one of the focus groups, several women admitted that they had not yet thought about the struggles they may face in reconciling their various future roles. As one woman said:

I think for me it’s because I’m not there yet. I’m not in a relationship. That’s just not something that’s on my mind necessarily. I’m just going with the flow and going to school right now and I’m going to get my job and if a relationship happens along the way, then that’s when I’ll start figuring out how things are going to be coordinated. But right now I’m kind of going with it and it doesn’t really occupy my mind.

While students were aware that their role models had made compromises in their lives, they did not seem to be aware of specific challenges that their women role models faced. And many participants did not have specific plans for negotiating their future goals. Nonetheless, the students in this study seemed optimistic about their chances to attain success via balancing the multiple aspects of their lives.

Participants noted that relationships were essential to balance and success. For example, Jealousy could not envision individual success separate from her relationships formed throughout her life:

I just want to be successful in school and get a good career going on for me. But I want to not focus so much on it that I don’t develop all the relationships that I have and will be making throughout it.

Maintaining relationships was a clear goal of most participants as they prepared to leave the college community. Many students noted that they wanted to be lauded fifty years from now for the ways they had fostered and preserved relationships. As Marvel stated:

I don’t think you can be a good person in life without having good relationships and learning from the bad ones. I think relationships are what make life what it is. And so I hope I’ve touched people’s life positively, so that they’ll want to speak in positive tones and words [about me in the future].

Many participants explained that they had clear expectations for future partners and family to support their aspirations and future role negotiation. Few participants expected to be without partners in the future. They perceived their ability to balance their various roles, and therefore achieve success via their own definitions, as dependent on the support of their friends and family. Several students had specific expectations for their partners which may not be easily met. These interview participants hoped for equality and communication in their relationships, and support from their partners that exceeded the models of their parents, campus role models, and friends. In many ways, these students staked their satisfaction on finding a partner who would support their personal and professional goals and plans for success without compromise. While an admirable plan, research shows that men and women have different ideas about family roles and compromise (Corrigall & Konrad, 2007; Hochschild, 1989). Multiple studies show that most married women continue to perform most of the housework, childcare, and planning tasks, whether or not they work outside the home (Damaske & Gerson, 2008; Gupta, 1999; Hochschild, 1989). Many of the study participants may find themselves unable to satisfactorily resolve issues of balance in their households. The work-family balance that these women defined as essential to success may be difficult to achieve, even with a supportive partner.

### **Success Involves Contributing to a Community**

Several of the participants defined success in terms of contributing to their communities. Deb said that a successful woman “feels like she’s making a difference in some way.” Marie added that a successful woman is able “to be effecting change in some way. To have that ability to do that. Whether it is monetarily or through your time.” Students’ desires to contribute to their communities are consistent with those of many women faculty members, who derive satisfaction from working with communities toward social change (Ropers-Huilman, 2000).

Some of the students suggested that giving back to their communities was tied to their religious beliefs. Most students did not wholly embrace Catholic doctrine as they understood it, and most also did not believe that the Catholicism of the institution affected their college experience in a substantial way. Still, nearly all students said that the Catholic heritage of their institutions infused values of community, volunteerism, and social justice into their campus life. While students at the two institutions expressed this influence differently, it appeared to affect their commitment to service, their goals for the future, and their definitions of success.

Many students stated that they want to be remembered for making a difference in someone’s life, making the world better, giving to others,

helping others, and touching others' lives. Participants did not locate these activities strictly within their personal or professional lives. Instead, their service was to be across all aspects of their lives, a cornerstone of their lives. In this way, participants in this study associated their future success with contributing to their community.

### **Successful Women Are Goal-Oriented**

Participants described successful women as independent, driven, and goal-oriented. Juliette noted that a successful woman "is able to identify what it is that she wants in her life and be willing to strive to attain it." Other women agreed that striving for their own personal goals was essential to success. Again, participants were expansive about what those goals may be. Kristine expanded the definition of success to include those who may not even achieve their goals:

I think that you're successful if you're accomplishing your own personal goals. So I would consider myself successful if I had set goals for myself and I was working to achieve those. Not necessarily even accomplishing those goals, but just achieving, striving to achieve them.

Participants articulated that strongly defined goals would help them prioritize and achieve balance in their lives.

Several participants had very strong professional goals and defined success as primarily related to career. Their career success, however, would not be measured in monetary terms, but in terms of following their passions. Jane noted that it is important to her:

To feel a measure of accomplishment. It doesn't have to be big accomplishments or economic accomplishments, but more doing something that makes you proud and that feeds your passion on some level. . . . In terms of economic success, I just want to make enough to live reasonably. Live someplace. I'd like to have just a little bit more than what I need. Maybe a little security. Be able to save some money. And have enough to share with other people.

Rebecca added that success is "not going for money or something; [it is] finding something that you're really passionate about to make you successful."

The relative unimportance of money to these women is consistent with the *Working Women* survey results described above (Kagan, 1993; O'Toole, 1993). O'Toole suggested that white middle- or upper-class women may have the luxury to devalue money, since society traditionally has expected men to perform the role of provider for the family, and white

men from middle- or upper-class families are more likely to have access to leadership positions. Therefore, race and class may play an important role in the nuances of this theme. Women in this study were predominantly white and from middle-class families. Additionally, most participants' primary role models—their parents—had modeled a family and work structure in which their father was the primary “breadwinner.”

Other research has shown that only a minority of women believe that providing economic support is a key component of their family role (Simon, 1995). Therefore, women's perceptions of their ability to be good mothers do not depend on their ability to provide financially for their children. In contrast, many men believe that providing economic support is a primary responsibility of fathers and husbands (Doucet, 2004; Simon, 1995). In line with these findings, the Catholic women's college students in this study, while valuing the importance of work, do not heavily weight the economic value of such work. This finding implies a complex role for Catholic women's colleges in developing women who are willing and able to financially support themselves (and their families) in the future. While goal-orientation was a salient part of participants' definition of success, money was not articulated as a primary goal among interviewees.

### **Successful Women Do Not Impede Their Own Success**

Participants in this study were clear that they controlled their own futures and that they felt responsible for their own success or failure. They felt empowered to achieve success and that they had adequate support and role models of successful women. Nevertheless, some still expressed insecurities related to their abilities to work toward their own goals and aspirations. For example, Maria noted that she had to stay focused and stay out of her own way in order to achieve her goals:

My definition of a successful woman is a woman who does not get in her own way. Meaning that you can have happiness. You can ... get your Ph.D.... You can have children if that is what you feel like. But at the end of the day, I've met a lot of amazing women and what sets them apart for me compared to their counterparts is that they set a goal. And even if they are afraid or if they feel like they are not going to accomplish that, they still go for it. And my mentor says, “Get out of your head. Quit thinking so much; get out of your head and just do it and don't get in your own way.” And for me that's what success is. It's really not allowing everything in the world or what you're thinking or feeling, all of that, to become so chaotic to the point where you're not living out what you're supposed to be doing.



Meredith agreed that the biggest struggle for women to achieve success was with their own insecurities. These women perceived that success, therefore, hinged on women's confidence as well as goal-orientation.

Findings from other parts of the interviews are also consistent with this theme. Some participants said that barriers to women's success were largely internal rather than external. They did not perceive gender discrimination or structural inequalities to be as disabling to success as women's internal beliefs about women's roles and abilities. Overall, the women in this study appeared confident about their internal ability to achieve their goals and certain that they would have the skills and knowledge to prioritize and balance their aspirations effectively. They appeared to be "staying out of their own way."

There were, however, signs that participants were unsure about their futures. One student admitted that she was "scared as hell" about graduating. During most of her interview, she talked about how her college experience had empowered her and how she felt prepared for the future. She was clearly charged to go out into the world and make a difference. But, near the end of her interview, she showed apprehensiveness; she was not sure she could make the change she wanted to see in the world.

Participants noted, however, that they would not let their fears and apprehensions keep them from becoming successful women. During focus group discussions, we asked students to comment further on their apprehensions about the future and the way they deal with them. Students at both institutions noted that their fears for the future were not debilitating, partly because they believed that they can be successful in the face of challenges. Students credited their college experiences and the communities at both institutions with preparing them to handle their fears about the future. They suggested that the emphasis on women's issues had allowed them to plan for challenges they would face as women. They attributed their confidence to their mentors and friends, who had created a supportive and caring environment in which they could face challenges, take risks, and demonstrate their capabilities without competing with men and worrying about judgment.

Several students noted that their study abroad experience had prepared them to experience the absence of friends, family, and community when they leave college. Studying abroad had taught them that they could function on their own and that they were able to establish new relationships and support networks, wherever they might be. Their experiences gave them a willingness and confidence to take risks. As one student in the focus group explained:

I understand what the risk is and I understand how to cope with it.  
I understand what happens to me when I feel not okay. And that

has been a really powerful thing to learn. Even though it won't be the same when [I am challenged] again, I'll know what it's like and I'll know how to deal with it.

This student clearly felt prepared to leave college, even though she felt fear about the future. Other students added that study abroad expanded their view of themselves and that of which they are capable. One woman noted that, "It kind of taught me that I can do basically anything I decide I want to do. I have those skills. It may be hard, but I know I can do it."

This attitude among interviewees clearly fits the fifth theme emerging from these interviews. Participants in this study would not let their fears and apprehensions keep them from becoming successful women. Their Catholic women's college experience had enabled them to meet challenges and face risks with confidence. This is perhaps the most important and ground-breaking theme emerging from this research because it speaks to the success of Catholic women's colleges in preparing their students for the future.

### Discussion

The interviewees described success in expansive ways which seemed to include all of the important women in their lives. Even though all of these women had intended to attend graduate school when they began their undergraduate education, they did not mention further education as essential to success. They did not limit success to societal measures (like money) or to measures commonly used in women's college literature (like educational or career achievement). Instead, their definitions were more holistic and dependent upon personal happiness, with attention paid to their responsibility to serve a larger social purpose. Most women understood success as subjective and internally defined. Many said that success meant striving, not necessarily achieving.

The results of this study suggest that measures of success must be revamped if educational researchers truly are to measure the effectiveness of colleges and universities in graduating successful women. In other words, if educators are to take seriously the success of Catholic women's college graduates, as negotiated among conflicting social expectations of women's roles, we must consider women's own subjective and internal definitions alongside more traditional measures of educational, economic, or occupational attainment. Such definitions would likely emphasize balance, relationships, contribution to community, and goal-orientation over money and career success.

This study also has implications for institutions of higher education, including Catholic women's colleges and secular coeducational institutions. Catholic women's colleges must investigate whether the

sense of empowerment they impart upon students is justified. How does it facilitate or impede graduates' abilities to identify, understand, and resist gendered inequalities that they will encounter in both professional and personal spheres? How are Catholic women's colleges, because of their unique missions, differently positioned to help women as they define and strive for their self-determined conceptions of success? Are different types of institutions—including Catholic women's colleges—satisfied with their efforts in this regard? Do they see women's holistic development and preparation for their diverse futures as parts of their missions?

Coeducational institutions can learn from the empowering model of Catholic women's colleges. Both women and men deserve college experiences that help them develop their internal definitions of success and give them the skills to achieve success according to those definitions. Also, reflecting perhaps a unique value of Catholic education, participants in this study emphasized contribution to community as an important element of success. As all kinds of institutions seek to prepare citizens and contribute to public good, they can look to Catholic women's colleges as a model for instilling these lifelong values in students' own understandings of future success.

The expansiveness of interviewees' visions of success left much room for them to fulfill their own definitions of success in the future. Participants outlined an optimistic and empowering definition which puts women in control of their own success. This study did not examine why students defined success in particular ways. Additional research could help determine if the relative unimportance of traditional measures of success was related to the gender, race, religion, or class of participants or to the values of the Catholic women's colleges from which this sample was drawn. Particularly, studies at identity-based institutions, like women's colleges and historically Black colleges and universities, which have often been praised for the traditionally defined success of their graduates, would further illuminate potential dimensions of success that were situated in a broader social and cultural context. Increased understanding of what success means to students at these institutions may help us understand what makes the influences of women's colleges and historically black colleges and universities on their graduates' lives truly laudable and perhaps imitable at other institutions. The need for this knowledge is especially urgent as these institutions struggle to retain their identities and financial viability.

### **Conclusion**

Women's definitions of success in this research may not equal broader society's definitions of success, but they are certainly influenced by those definitions. Many women will be judged successful or unsuccessful by

measures incongruent with their own understandings. In college, students develop definitions of success and learn skills in order to attain success by those definitions. In many ways, student and alumni satisfaction with college depends on students' perceptions of their college as preparing them for future success. Catholic women's colleges offer a unique environment within which women students develop and learn. The Catholic women's college students in this study described definitions of success which were empowering and attainable, leaving much room for future success among these women. These colleges' abilities to develop students who are successful according to the students' own definitions are worth further examination and imitation, if all colleges are to develop "successful" women graduates.



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