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## Editorial: The Complexities of “College Success”

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## The Complexities of “College Success”

Politicians seem to have little difficulty defining “college success.” To them it’s obvious: progress toward a degree—in other words, the steady, inexorable accumulation of credit hours. Governor Mike Pence, Indiana, has proclaimed, “Providing access to college without success through the award of a degree is a failure for our students” (“The State That Works: Improving Academic Success for Indiana College Students.” 2012. N. pag. *MikePence.com*. Web. 20 Dec. 2012). To academics, however, the definition is more slippery. For Michael McPherson and Morton Owen Shapiro, authors of *College Success: What It Means and How to Make It Happen* (2008), defining the term is a more daunting task: “It isn’t easy to even agree on how to define college success, much less figure out how to encourage it.”

Instead of trying to come up with my own definition, I thought it would be instructive to find out how almost seventy of my own FYC writing students would define “success.” So I asked them to respond to this prompt: “Have you been successful in this class? Why or why not? How are you defining *success*?” I collected their anonymous responses and analyzed them. Here’s what I found:

**TABLE 1. Highlights of Student Response to Prompt on Success (n=69)**

FACTOR OF SUCCESS	PERCENTAGE
Learning something	52%
Earning a desired grade	44%
Giving a full effort	36%
Keeping up with the work	35%
Achieving personal goals	30%
Transference of learning	28%
Feeling pride of accomplishment	19%
I was unsuccessful	14%
Excluding grades as a factor	12%
Earning credit by passing	3%

I found that 91% of the students' responses identified more than a single factor defining success (or lack of it). Quite a few responses expressed surprise at what they described as success. Many students identified specific skills or concepts learned, sometimes pointing out how they transferred these skills to other situations. A number of responses spoke of feeling a sense of accomplishment, of giving their best effort, of achieving their own personal goals. And a majority spoke of having learned. And, oh yes, 3% mentioned earning credit toward graduation.

My meditation is prompted by reading Rick Kempa's poem "Of Essays and Eight Ball" in this issue, which wryly narrates an encounter between a professor and a former student, in terms more nuanced and complex than those voiced by our elected officials. McPherson and Schapiro write: "Students in American higher education start from very different points and seek very different destinations. But the ultimate aim of any educational encounter is to transform in some way, be it to enhance earning potential or to instill a love of learning—or very likely somewhere in between" (49). I suspect that *TETYC* readers also know firsthand the complexity of the question "Did you succeed?" Read Kempa's poem and see if it doesn't capture that complexity more accurately than Governor Pence's pronouncement.

—J.S.

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## SEARCH FOR NEW EDITOR OF *COLLEGE ENGLISH*

NCTE is seeking a new editor of *College English*. In July 2017 the term of the present editor, Kelly Ritter, will end. Interested persons should send a letter of application to be received **no later than September 4, 2015**. Letters should include the applicant's vision for the journal and be accompanied by the applicant's vita, one sample of published writing (article or chapter), and two letters specifying financial support from appropriate administrators at the applicant's institution. **Finalists will be interviewed at the NCTE Annual Convention in Minneapolis in November 2015**. The applicant appointed by the NCTE Executive Committee will effect a transition, preparing for his or her first issue in September 2017. The appointment is for five years. Applications should be submitted via email in PDF form to [kaustin@ncte.org](mailto:kaustin@ncte.org); please include "College English Editor Application" in the subject line. Direct queries to Kurt Austin, NCTE Senior Developer for Publications, at the email address above, or call 217-328-3870, extension 3619.

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