Dustin Hixenbaugh
Student Success Statement

"If no one is learning, then no one is teaching."

My first job out of college was teaching English Language Arts (ELA) to ninth- and twelfth-graders in La Joya, Texas, a small town straddling the Mexican border. As a new teacher just a few years older than my students and unfamiliar with the community, I leaned on the wisdom and experience of my department leaders and colleagues. Though I heard many words of advice during these foundational years in my career as an educator, the ones that have most profoundly shaped my approach to teaching are the ones I have reprinted at the top of this page. They were relayed to me by José Mancías, speech coach and two-time Teacher of the Year award winner, and they remind me that effective classrooms place students, not teachers, at the center; that teaching methods and activities are worthwhile only insofar as they advance student learning; and that teachers who desire to lead their students toward meaningful learning outcomes must regularly assess their students' progress toward those outcomes.

Of course, the methods I use to assess my students' learning have matured and expanded over the last decade. In my first two years at La Joya, I was a Teach For America corps member and felt encouraged to become a kind of Jaime Escalante who would lead 125+ students—almost all of them reading below their grade level, many of them English Language Learners—to earn distinguished scores on state and national tests. Looking back, I take pride in what some of my high school students were able to accomplish. For instance, I remember Aracely, a student in my exam remediation course, who finally passed the eleventh-grade state ELA assessment at the end of her senior year. For Aracely, the big prize was the right to walk in the graduation ceremony with her peers. For me, it was knowing that she would have access to opportunities for higher education and employment that would have been closed to her had she left the school without a diploma in her hand. As a teacher educator, I encourage developing teachers to cast a skeptical eye on standardized tests, which at their worst have been known to perpetuate white supremacy and economic disparity. Even so, I know my students are relying on me to help prepare them for exams like the Praxis, TeXes, GRE, and LSAT, which report certain measures of their reading, writing, and critical thinking skills back to potential schools and employers. Flawed though these tests are, they play important roles in the futures many of my students want for themselves, and I would be a negligent teacher if I did not take readying my students for them seriously.

As a graduate instructor and professor, I have developed an amplified vision for student success. This vision is guided by Gloria Ladson-Billings's theory of culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP), which, as she explains in various writings, has three main tenets: 1) holding all students to equally high expectations for achievement; 2) providing students a space to practice content knowledge and skills in culturally-specific ways, thus developing their cultural competence; and 3) cultivating students' socio-political consciousness and encouraging them to apply their school learning toward the dismantling of the kinds of systems of inequality that standardized exams were designed to protect. One way I have given Ladson-Billings's theories life in my classroom is by turning away from using tests as the primary measure of the extent and value of my students' learning. At the beginning of a new course, I tend to introduce learning outcomes and essential questions and encourage students to explain how mastering these outcomes and being able to answer these questions will enhance their lives. For instance, in the first-year composition course I teach every semester at Bethany College, I have replaced the conventional, top-down grading structure with a version of Peg Syverson's Learning Record (learningrecord.org). At the

start of the term, students self-assess their competence in five areas (analysis, research, argumentation, writing process, and community). At the middle and end of the term, they review their self-assessments and compose new papers using excerpts from their own writings to reflect on their progress and determine the letter grades they have earned. Even in classes where I continue to utilize a traditional grading system, such as "Literature and Literary Diversity," I strategically integrate assignments that students must score themselves. From my students I have received feedback that handing over some or all of the responsibility for grading builds students' trust and motivation. I remain committed to helping students achieve success on their own terms.

At Bethany College, which boasts a student body of 500 and is by far the smallest school community I have been a part of, I have been able to build strong relationships with students and gain a better understanding of the outside factors that influence students' ability to succeed in my courses. In 2017, I worked with a student (he was soon to be elected Student Body President) to open a club for students who identify as LGBTQIA+. At the time I was hired, there was no such organization in operation on the college campus. At the beginning of the current academic year, the club's leaders decided that they would focus on eradicating transphobia. Together, we built relationships with local members of the trans community, organized a three-night trans speaker series, and provided faculty development on supporting trans students in the classroom. This year, I also agreed to advise a group of students quite different from the students I have tended to work with in secondary and postsecondary settings—the recipients of the prestigious Presidential Scholarship. As the advisor to this latter group, which was mostly female and entirely white, I was able to reshape the award application and interview process to provide prospective students a wider range of opportunities to demonstrate their excellence and potential for collegiate success. For instance, I diversified the interview panels to include not only faculty members (as had been done in previous years), but also chaplains, staff members, and, most importantly, the existing recipients of the award. In the end, the same number of scholarships were offered, but they were offered to a group that included more men and, for the first time in the award's three-year history, students of color. As advisor to these student groups and a chair or member of crucial faculty committees, I have been able to share my broader vision for student achievement with other members of the Bethany faculty, and this, I hope, will mean the beginning of real and lasting changes in their own perceptions and evaluations of student success.

In the end, the most important measure of the success of my teaching is the academic and personal growth that is made by my students. This growth is not calculated by standardized tests alone, but also by the skill and confidence with which my students apply their learning to goals that matter to them. Furthermore, this growth must not be evident only in students who look like me and share my identity markers, but by all of the students I have the privilege of working with. As a member of the English faculty at San Jacinto College, I will continue to hold students to high academic standards, while also getting to know them as unique individuals, building strong professional relationships with them, offering multiple opportunities for them to learn and demonstrate their mastery of course content, and working tirelessly to improve my own teaching craft. To return, in closing, to the platitude I discussed at the beginning of this statement, I must just as often be the one "learning" in my classroom as I am the one "teaching" in it.