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# Charting the Design of Community College Student Success Courses: Uncovering Their Espoused and Enacted Curricula

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## Abstract

Community colleges increasingly turn to various types of student success courses for their potential as high-impact practices to foster college completion. Despite commonly held assumptions of what characterizes these interventions, upon close inspection there is an unscrutinized, circular confounding of their goals and means which limits the ability of educators to design, deliver, and assess them adequately. In this mixed methods study of 45 community college student success programs across the United States, we show how a sociocultural perspective helps to clarify the espoused versus enacted curriculum of student success courses and to explain the problematic tendency to continuously expand their curricular scope. Additionally, findings reveal the latent salience that instructors place on developing self-awareness and a college-going identity, notions rarely invoked as justification for student success courses to the same degree as instrumentalist notions of skills, navigation, and career planning valued by the traditional completion agenda discourse.

The rise of the Completion Agenda in recent years, which aims to drastically increase college attainment rates in the United States, has reshaped the rhetoric surrounding community colleges' (CCs') role in increasing college credential and degree attainment (C. Baldwin, 2017; Lester, 2014). One of the results has been an effort to identify and scale up so-called "high-impact practices" (HIPs) that proponents claim hold promise to foster greater student success (D. K. Hatch et al., 2016; Waiwaiole et al., 2016) compared to traditional practices. These may be relatively brief orientations or comprehensive First Year Experience initiatives, or something in between (Hatch & Bohlig, 2016; Young & Hopp, 2014). The most typical manifestations, however, of such student success programs are semester-long, credit-bearing courses that are offered alongside academic and vocational courses (Young & Hopp, 2014). Called collectively *student success courses* (SSCs), they include extended orientation, college skills courses, and first-year seminars, among others.

Literature reviews and national surveys (Crisp & Taggart, 2013; Young & Hopp, 2014) show that the desired outcomes for these many types of SSCs are expansive, including both proximal outcomes (e.g., high grades, behavioral and attitudinal learning outcomes of multicultural awareness, and civic responsibility, among others) and distal ones (e.g., persistence, attainment, and career selection). To achieve these many ends, which address multiple aspects of the contested missions of CCs (Dougherty, 2001), SSCs naturally deploy a remarkably wide variety of curricular strategies as way to implement *mechanisms of student support*, as Karp (2016) calls them, proven through decades of empirical studies (Fong et al., 2016).

What is not forthcoming in the research literature, however, is an understanding of whether, or how, SSCs have the capacity to effectively deploy those many mechanisms simultaneously to achieve their goals. One of the fundamental reasons for the uncertainty despite decades of research on effective college student support measures, some argue (Crisp & Taggart, 2013), is that studies regularly underreport the programmatic details of interventions, and there is simply too little information to make comparisons across studies.

We argue, though, that the issue goes beyond just a lack of definitional specificity. Rather, a more fundamental source of ambiguity is a lack of clarity regarding the fundamental understanding of what characterizes SSCs versus what their purpose is. Such ambiguity is characteristic of definitions and descriptions of SSCs throughout the literature, resulting in an unscrutinized conflation of means and ends, or course content and purposes, a phenomenon we revisit in the literature review. Consequently, students and instructors are not always clear whether in practice the purpose of these courses is, for instance, to become acquainted with various college skills and knowledge, show mastery of them, or to rehearse them in a low-risk environment (D. K. Hatch, Mardock-Uman, Garcia et al., 2018). The evidence from (D. K. Hatch, Mardock-Uman, Garcia et al., 2018) shows that the gap between the curriculum that is espoused in course catalogs, syllabi, and instructors' statements and the curriculum that is enacted through implementation and lived experience can lead to a great deal of uncertainty about performance and assessment expectations by instructors and students alike. The blurring of features and purposes also reflects the larger, yet rarely researched, conversation among educators regarding the role of SSCs, including who should teach them, and the extent they are required and integrated with the rest of the curriculum (Hatch-Tocaimaza et al., 2019).

## Purpose and research questions

Without a clearer conceptual distinction between purposes and features (aims vs. means) of CC SSCs, practitioners are hampered in their ability to design, assess, or scale them up to reach the students who need them most. By investigating CC SSCs as currently practiced through a multisite mixed-methods study, we tease apart the enacted from the espoused curriculum of SSCs by identifying the variety of instructors' perspectives of the purposes for courses, the features instructors use to accomplish those purposes, and the relationship, if any, between the two. Our research questions were:

- (1) What do instructors tend to identify as the desired long-term outcomes their courses are designed to achieve?
- (2) What are the means instructors employ to work toward their purposes for the course?
- (3) What relationship, if any, is there between course long-term purposes and the means employed to achieve them?

## Review of the literature

### *The variety of student success course curricula*

Studies of SSCs highlight their wide-ranging curricula such as academic planning, study skills training, career exploration, awareness of study styles, and development of financial literacy, and time management, among many others. Many programs integrate personal assistance such as tutoring and special assistance with childcare and other social services (Cho & Karp, 2013; Hatch & Bohlig, 2016; O'Gara et al., 2009; Young & Hopp, 2014). These various curricular features are found across all types of courses, whether academic seminars, extended orientations, basis study skills programs, or contextualized discipline-oriented first-year seminars, among others (Hatch & Bohlig, 2016; Young & Hopp, 2014). The expansive reach of curricula has been shown to occur through mission creep and the abundant evidence in favor of many mediating mechanisms of student success (Karp et al., 2012) for which educators design opportunities for student to enact (Karp, 2016).

Yet at the same time, studies also tend to identify a relatively narrow set of rationales for SSCs. The literature shows that the prevailing philosophy has traditionally been a decidedly deficit perspective that such programs "... can be seen as compensatory, helping disadvantaged students overcome their potential lack of information, cultural capital, or academic preparedness ... [thus] providing them with additional resources and opportunities that help them become integrated into the college environment" (O'Gara et al., 2009, p. 196). However, case study research has shown that instructors in practice enact more humanist and asset-based approaches (Hatch-Tocaimaza et al., 2019).

### *Curricular logic of student success courses*

The claim that current approaches to designing SSCs are often problematic is perhaps not surprising if we consider that the curriculum of any course of study is tentative and emergent. Curriculum theorists show us that a tension between pedagogical process and product is an inherent principle of developing curriculum (Lattuca & Stark, 2009). Additionally,

the evidence shows that the common understanding of what the very notion of curriculum is varies widely among educators. The often ambiguous distinctions between content, learning objectives, and outcomes in SSCs is arguably just one instance of “individuals [talking] about ‘curriculum’ with the untested assumption that they are speaking a shared language” (Lattuca & Stark, 2009, p. 3).

To make sense of the multiple aspects and levels of curricula, Lattuca and Stark (2009) offer the concept of the *academic plan* that describes curriculum development and implementation at a number of levels: from a single lesson up to majors, colleges, and even entire institutions. An academic plan involves multiple decision points embedded in a sociocultural context of external, institutional, and unit-level influences. The decision points are eight: (1) purposes, (2) content, (3) sequence, (4) learners, (5) instructional processes, (6) instructional resources, (7) evaluation, and (8) adjustment. Lattuca and Stark propose that there is no designated sequence in the crafting of curricula, with one exception: that of *adjustment* based on experience and evaluation. They do, however, connect *purposes* and *content* with a double arrow based on empirical evidence that these two elements are consistently related in the minds of instructors.

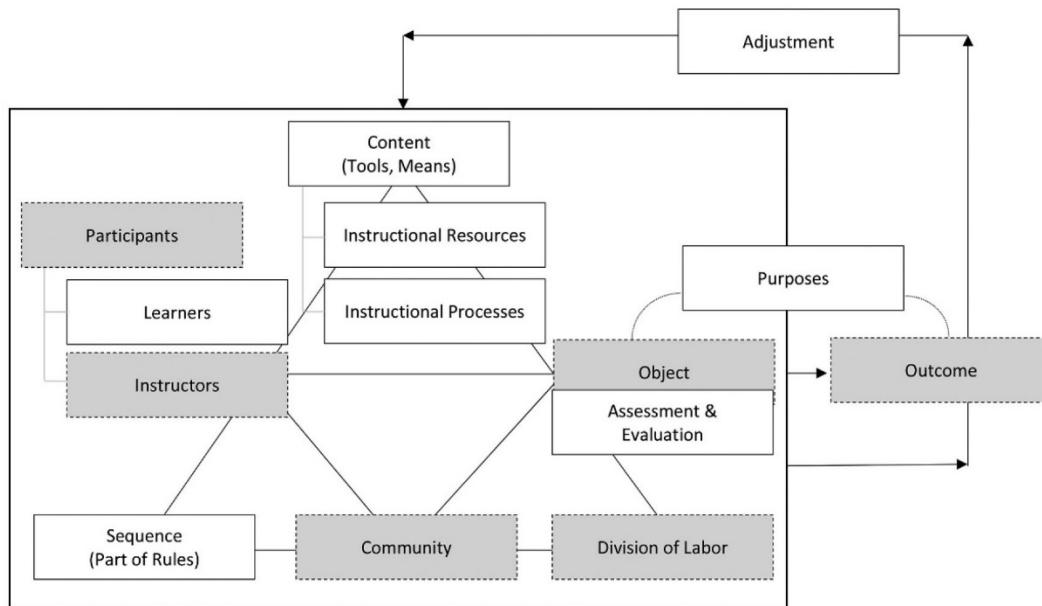
The interdependent relationship of purposes and content takes on an additional complication for SSCs. Lattuca and Stark (2009) note that there are two forms of curricular purposes: educational outcomes that are either (a) subject-matter specific, or (b) aspirational. However, in SSCs, which are effectively meta-college courses about college-going, there is no distinction between subject-matter goals and aspirational educational goals. Moreover, the content itself is likewise often coterminous with both of these purposes, as exemplified in the description of a typical program (Cho & Karp, 2013) where, for instance, learning outcomes (e.g., directing students to services, giving students tools) are often coterminous with the subject matter meant to achieve them (e.g., providing information and instruction in personal skills and study habits, among others). Aspirational outcomes extend well beyond the assessment potential of the course itself.

### ***Theoretical framing: disentangling the curriculum through a curricular activity system***

To disentangle the undifferentiated elements of SSCs we turn to activity theory (Roth & Lee, 2007; Yamagata-Lynch, 2010), a sociocultural perspective complementary to Lattuca and Stark (2009) academic plan, which breaks down the notion of *purposes* into two separate concepts: objects and outcomes. In activity theory, human behavior is a socially-embedded, object-oriented activity where individuals act independently and collectively toward a given aim, with that work mediated by physical and conceptual tools. In Lattuca and Stark’s framework, tools for a SSC equate to instructional resources—typically books, equipment, readings, exercises, etc.—including instructional processes such as group work and presentation rehearsals, for example. Activity systems are further shaped by formal rules and societal norms (including in this case the syllabus, unit sequence, attendance requirements, classroom norms), as well as by the larger community and the social context. Objects (near-term and momentary learning and performance objectives) are part of an activity system, but outcomes (consequences or products of an activity) are necessarily outside the activity proper, though they may be in turn inputs to subsequent activity systems (Engeström, 2010).

To conceptualize our study, and make explicit the distinction between objects and outcomes within the overall idea of curricular *purposes*, we map the elements of Lattuca and Stark (2009) academic plan framework to an activity system triangle (Yamagata-Lynch, 2010) relying on their shared sociocultural epistemologies and similar elements. Important to note is that we leverage activity theory in narrow terms to focus our attention on the differences between distal educational outcomes and the proximal learning objects mediated by pedagogical tools (both instructional resources and instructional processes). Our selective focus is necessary given the premise of our argument, corroborated by Lattuca and Stark, that curriculum purpose and content need to be sorted out first before other curriculum development efforts.

Figure 1 represents, then, the combination of both frameworks, based on their shared sociocultural nature, with elements of academic plans (with solid borders) placed roughly according to their corresponding location in an activity theory triangle of mediation (in grayscale and dashed outlines). Such a joint framework we refer to as a *curricular activity system*—a way of arranging features that Lattuca and Stark (2009) opt to leave unordered.



**Figure 1.** A curricular activity system: Elements of a curricular academic plan (Lattuca & Stark, 2009), in white boxes, overlaid as elements of a mediated activity system (Engeström, 2010; Yamagata-Lynch, 2010), in grayscale boxes.

## Methodology

This study adopted a concurrent nested mixed methods design using secondary data drawn from a national research project on the scope and design of community college SSCs conducted during fall 2015. Concurrent nested designs are useful when qualitative and

quantitative data are collected simultaneously and the use of data is to “confirm, cross-validate, or corroborate findings within a single study” (Creswell et al., 2003, p. 229).

### *Participants*

There were 45 participating course sections at 40 public CCs in 24 states, representing all geographic regions of the United States. Participants were recruited from a list of all medium to large public two-year, primarily associates-granting institutions ( $N = 665$ ) and were selected for contact at random from the sampling frame, and the executive leaders were sent an invitation. Recruiting proceeded until we reached 40 participating institutions. Administrators at each participating institution then provided contact information for the instructor of a course and course section of their choice; invitations were sent to these instructors.

### *Course feature inventory*

Research team members conducted in-depth course feature inventories by interviewing participating course instructors by leveraging a protocol called the Community College Student Success Program Inventory (CCSSPI), confirmed for its content validity, and based on a series of prior studies (D. K. Hatch, Mardock-Uman, Nelson et al., 2018), and uses a mix of question types for different curricular aspects. The first portion relies on open-ended but structured questions to identify instructors’ course goals, themes, and logistical details. The heart of the instrument is a structured set of branch-dependent questions derived from Hatch and Bohlig (2016) typology of HIP program elements. These items assess the inclusion and functional prominence of 29 curricular features in five categories.

### *Qualitative analysis of course purposes*

In order to answer our first research question regarding desired long-term outcomes, we examined emergent patterns from responses to two key CCSSPI items. The first item (IQ1) was open-ended:

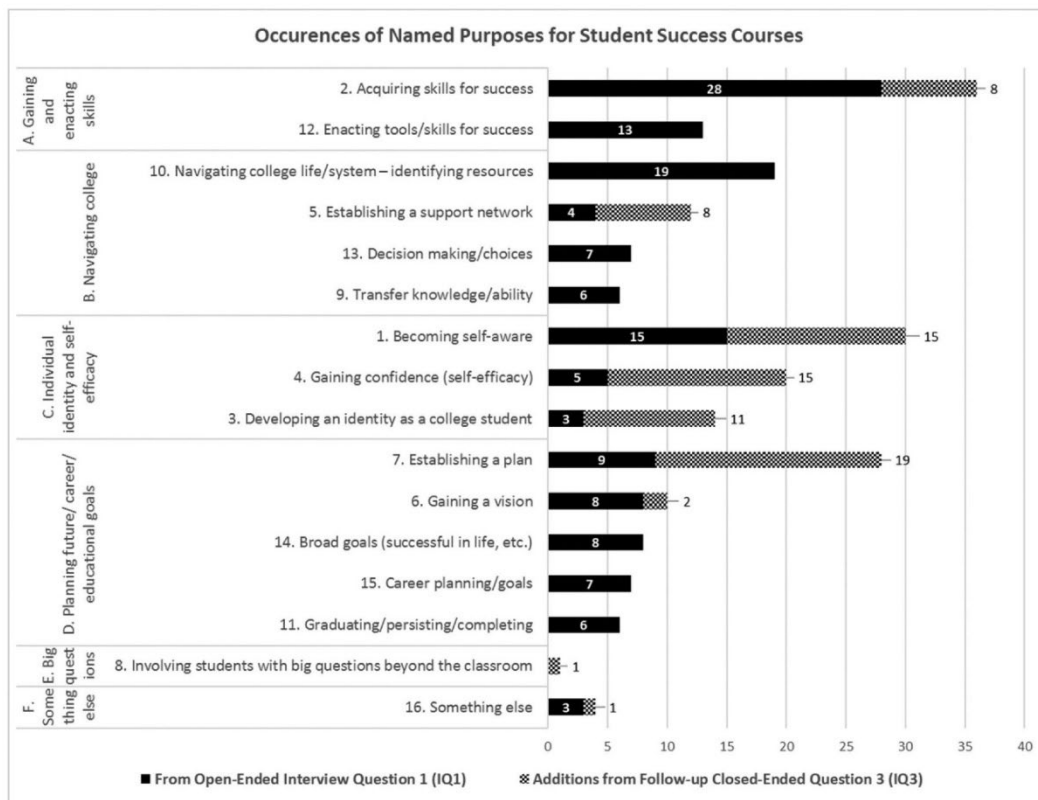
*IQ1: In your words, after the course/program is completed, and the students move on, what do you hope or expect to be the ultimate outcome for them?*

A follow-up to this question (IQ3) was a closed-ended, multiple response prompt:

*IQ3: If you were to select two of the following themes or goals that most comprehensively reflect the character of your course, which two would you choose?*

The options for this latter question, based on background research to the CCSSPI, were: (1) becoming self-aware, (2) acquiring skills, (3) developing an identity as a college student, (4) gaining confidence (self-efficacy), (5) establishing a support network, (6) gaining a vision, (7) establishing a plan, (8) involving students with big questions beyond the classroom, or something else. If instructors selected *something else*, they were asked to specify the theme or goal. These eight purposes became the seed codes in our qualitative analysis, and provided the basis for quantitative analysis of the prominence of different course purposes.

The four researchers on the team each took different roles in the analysis. Researcher Two led out the first-cycle coding of responses to IQ1 using a structural coding approach (Saldaña, 2016) based on our conceptual framework and simultaneously employed descriptive coding to further identify emergent notions that did not fit into a priori categories. Once all responses were coded, Researcher Three then looked across the areas labeled as “something else” and grouped similar responses together under newly developed codes. Researcher Two then reviewed the emergent coding scheme and independently coded the open-ended responses to IQ1. Researchers One and Three together reviewed both sets of coding, compiling a list of agreed-upon codes and noting areas of disagreement. Researcher Four was brought in to review the areas of disagreement and finalize the codes assigned to data passages, in the process creating a few further coding distinctions. At this point, the course syllabi were also structurally coded as additional data sources for course purposes. We grouped individual codes in a second cycle of axial coding based on theme connection and divergence, as seen in Figure 2 in the main text and explored in the study’s findings and discussion sections.



**Figure 2.** Occurrences and groupings of named purposes (expected course outcomes).



***Qualitative analysis of pedagogical means***

Researcher Two also led out the qualitative analysis of the course features that instructors described. The second interview question (IQ2) was also open-ended:

*IQ2: What are some of the most prominent activities that you do in class to help you achieve the overall purpose of the course/program?*

The analysis of IQ2 proceeded much like that of IQ1. The first-cycle coding of responses to this question also began with structural coding (Saldaña, 2016), this time using mechanisms from the CCSSPI to identify the means through which instructors worked to achieve the objectives of their courses, broadly categorized as (1) community building activities, (2) college skills instruction activities, or (3) ancillary support activities. Again, descriptive coding was used to capture additional types of activities that did not fit the previously established codes.

Following this first round of coding, the descriptive codes that had emerged were analyzed further and, where appropriate, grouped together as pattern codes. At this point, the syllabi were also coded for these features. The coded data were then charted across all sources (Saldaña, 2016), enabling comparisons and summaries, which were recorded in analytic memos by Researcher Three. Researcher One reviewed the code charts and accompanying analytic memos, going back to Researcher Three with questions and challenges to the analysis which were then discussed and resolved through research team-wide deliberations.

**Quantitizing of course features**

To maximize the analytical possibilities within the data regarding course features across courses, we quantitized (Sandelowski et al., 2009) the structured curricular inventories of 29 features, organized into five categories, as specified in the CCSSPI (Table 1). Quantitizing, a type of magnitude coding (Saldaña, 2016), involves “assigning numerical (nominal or ordinal) values to data conceived as not numerical” (Sandelowski et al., 2009, p. 2). The wording in the CCSSPI was:

For each [topic, module, or activity that I read], please tell me whether you include it, and if so, how it is implemented, how much time you spend on it, [or] what percentage of the course involves students actively engaged with this feature?

The goal of the prompt was to categorize and catalog which types of content (in the sense of *curricular activity system* tools) are used during the enactment of the activity in comparable ways. The particular descriptive and inferential quantitative analyses used are explained within the findings.

**Table 1.** Curricular and pedagogical features of student success courses**College Success Skills**

Time management skills  
 Study skills  
 Note-taking skills  
 Test-taking skills  
 Research skills or use of information  
 Basic technology skills  
 Oratory or presentation skills  
 Debate skills  
 Trust or confidence building activities  
 Budgeting or financial literacy  
 Learning style assessment  
 Identification of personal strengths and challenges

**Collaborative and Contextualized Learning**

Assigned group projects/assignments  
 Assigned study groups outside of class time  
 Common readings  
 Assignments focused on a common theme  
 Contextualized curriculum or discipline-related content and activities

**Academic Planning and Student Services**

The development of a written individual academic  
 Academic support services and/or personal/social support services  
 Group academic advising  
 Individual academic advising  
 Career orientation or counseling  
 Training of online learning

**Co-curricular and Community Activities**

Campus or community service project  
 Participation in campus activities/events/groups outside the classroom  
 Service learning

**Ancillary Instruction**

Mentoring  
 Tutoring  
 Supplemental instruction

Source: Hatch and Bohlig (2016)

***Researchers' reflexivity and position***

Throughout the qualitative data analysis process, we engaged in discussions to question assumptions, offer competing explanations, and converge in our coding and interpretations in order to strengthen the trustworthiness of our analyses. All of us maintain scholarly research agendas focused on student success within CCs and possess personal experiences either as former CC students or instructors. The first and fourth researchers had previous professional experiences with a national organization focused on CC student engagement in which they investigated high impact practices and student success initiatives. The first researcher's interest in CCs, and student success programs in particular, ultimately stems from his professional background as well as his own experience as a CC student, for whom a success course was instrumental in navigating college. The second researcher, as a CC instructor who works with many students who are the first in their families to attend college, is invested in understanding how these types of courses work and how they improve

outcomes for CC students. The third and fourth researchers' perspectives are informed by their personal experiences as CC transfer students as well as their scholarly endeavors focused on this population.

## Findings

### *Research question 1: purposes of the course*

Prior research regarding instructors' desired long-term outcomes for SSCs are reflected in the CCSPI (1 to 7 named above in the Qualitative Analysis of Course Purpose section) and thus were our starting point. The process of inductive analysis of all the sources of evidence resulted in the emergence of seven additional purposes for a total of 15 different purposes, as shown in Figure 2, with a handful of outliers remaining coded as *something else*. These 15 notions compose an ambitious set of goals for SSCs. To make sense of them, our second-cycle coding resulted in four major groupings (Figure 2) that we derived et al. through the lens of various forms of capital—whether classical human, Bourdieuan (Labaree, 1997; Sablan & Tierney, 2014), or community cultural conceptualizations of capital that critique the predominant, and arguably oppressive, perspectives (Yosso, 2005).

These groupings, as reflected in Figure 2, begin with (a) *gaining and enacting skills* for success linked two naturally complementary course goals that reflect traditional notions of cultural capital and classical human capital for college success. Next, there were several course purposes that all shared the aim of successfully (b) *navigating college* by helping students identify resources on campus, connect with others that could serve as a support network, learn effective decision making to guide the students' college experiences, and understand the transfer process. These purposes were clearly reminiscent of navigational capital within Yosso's (2005) framework, though lacking an overt recognition of systemic racism that is foundational to the community cultural wealth perspective.

The next group of purposes was in relation to helping the student in developing (c) *individual identity* (as a college-going student) and *self-efficacy*. For minoritized and vulnerable students, Yosso's (2005) notion of aspirational capital applies here, in part, to the extent that maintaining hopes and dreams despite barriers includes overcoming internalized barriers of self-image shaped by society. The category of individual identity and self-efficacy additionally relates, according to Sablan and Tierney (2014), to cultural capital necessarily through the role of agency in individuals "[becoming] active producers in their own social space, as opposed to passive recipients of conditions within social structures" (p. 179). Indeed, identity formation operates as a function of a person's agentic negotiation with the beliefs, rules, values, and expectations of the college social setting (Scanlon et al., 2007).

The final group of course purposes dealt with (d) *planning future/career/educational goals*. Different instructors focused on a wide range of goals, including that of gaining a vision or world view to inform one's action and establishing broad goals well outside the college and throughout a lifetime; whereas establishing a plan went a step closer to taking action in the near term to achieve those particular aims. This purpose is arguably most clearly understood through a lens of human capital (Labaree, 1997) that posits individuals' knowledge and skills shape their objectives and their abilities to pursue them. Lastly, the desired outcome of (e) *engaging learners with big questions beyond the classroom*, an emergent

theme in D. K. Hatch, Mardock-Uman, Garcia et al.'s (2018) case study, turned out to be an outlier, one of a handful of *other* goals identified across participants.

Figure 2 shows the number of times these various purposes occurred in instructors' responses, both open- and closed-ended interview items. Among these 15 purposes, instructors on average identified 4.9 per course ( $SD = 1.7$ , min = 2, max = 10). Whereas the most prominent responses to the open-ended question at the outset of the interviews were *gaining and enacting skills for success*, *navigating college*, and *becoming self-aware*, when given the opportunity to identify what most characterizes their courses, instructors emphasized disproportionately *planning* and *self-awareness*. In the case of the latter, the broader notion of its grouping *college-going identity and self-efficacy*, arguably became one of the most important themes overall, contrary to the primacy of skills and navigation in most SSC rhetoric.

#### *Acquiring and enacting skills*

Twenty-seven of the 45 instructors identified *acquiring* skills as an essential course goal. The skills, also referred to as *strategies* and *tools*, to be acquired were sometimes specifically mentioned, for example, time management, organization, reading, note-taking, and writing; others were described in broader terms such as "skills to succeed in college." Enacting college success skills is vitally different than acquiring them according to the literature on CC SSCs (Karp et al., 2017). But though the application of skills was less commonly cited compared to acquiring skills, those instructors in our study who did note the difference were emphatic in the importance of applying skills to support student success in college and beyond.

#### *Navigating college*

We followed instructors' lead in distinguishing decision-making specifically from other college skills, which were often spoken of in broad undifferentiated terms. In the former case, instructors stressed the importance of students "understanding the world around them and the choices they make" and making "wise" choices with an understanding of "the outcomes of those choices." This longitudinal character of decision-making led us to group it together with mentions of navigating college life/systems, establishing a support network, and gaining knowledge of the transfer process. The metaphor of navigation would entail, like in the physical world, a networked system of pathways and resources to traverse them. Though the idea of "establishing a support network" was a popular choice in the follow-up IQ3, only four instructors articulated it initially. Instructors articulated the hope that students would learn about and then use resources and services on campus to support their success. These resources included academic services, in addition to supports needed beyond the classroom, such as social connections and a broad understanding of the college system.

#### *Planning future/career/educational goals*

Instructors readily identified several facets of planning as a desired outcome or prominent theme of the course. Instructors talked about academic planning, i.e., an academic/degree or transfer plan, understanding financial aid implications of electives, and academic

progress. Yet other instructors contextualized these near-term plans as parts of “lifelong goals,” how to confront obstacles students may encounter along the way. Success in life, though largely undefined, also seemed to be at the heart of related outcomes such as having successful interpersonal relationships, being prepared for the real world, and being mentally healthy. Finally, some instructors stated the desired outcome of the course in terms of institutional goals such as improving retention or completion rates—rather than in terms of what they hoped for individual students.

#### *College-going identity and self-efficacy*

Though developing an identity as a college student was commonly selected by instructors from among the closed-ended list of prominent themes for their courses, it was not broadly commented on. Rather, instructors spoke of the goal of students becoming self-aware and self-efficacious, as one instructor stated, “to understand their own goals, values, and skills.” Instructors noted they wanted students to know “why they are in school” and to have a better understanding of “who they are as a learner” in terms of identifying personal strengths and weaknesses. This increased knowledge of self was sometimes related to goal setting and academic or career planning—self-reflection to articulate and connect beliefs and values with goals. One instructor explained that she did not want students to feel intimidated by being in college. Related to these enabling attitudes and sense of one’s self-awareness, instructors named goals of developing self-efficacy, academic integrity, tenacity, or professionalism, all seen as determinants of college success.

#### *Purposes according to course syllabi*

The instructors’ stated interest in their course influencing students’ career success or general “success in life,” figured prominently in the syllabi. However, these statements always appeared in conjunction with academic success, and never as primary outcomes in their own right. A typical outcome of this type stated that “The subject of this class is SUCCESS . . . what success is and how to achieve it in college and your future career.” While the desired outcomes stated on course syllabi in the sample tended to be relatively narrow and more focused on preparing students for upcoming coursework, compared to what the instructors reported during the interview, some course syllabi in the sample also stated intended outcomes for students that could be realized only far beyond the end of the course. For example, one course purported to “assist students in realizing their full potential” and another promised that “together, we will discover how to create a rich, personally fulfilling life.” Such aspirational goals that featured prominently in the course syllabi are in contrast to the relatively small role they played in instructors’ responses to open- and close-ended questions.

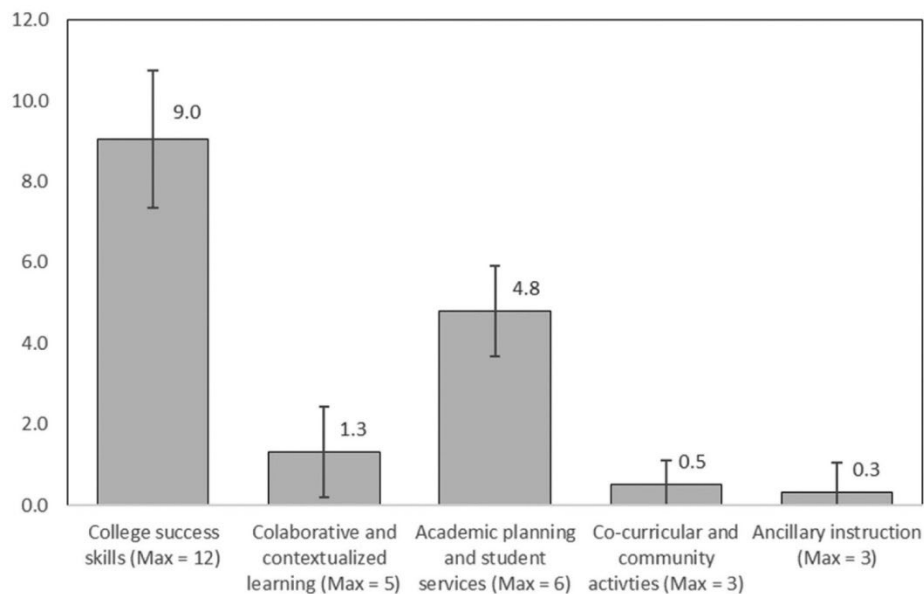
In contrast to outcomes pointing to student success, whether solely academic or also professional and/or personal, a quarter of the course syllabi listed outcomes focused on *planning* for success. In these courses, the ultimate intended outcome of the course was having an educational plan or educational, and sometimes career or life, goals. Outcomes in this area were articulated in a variety of ways, including making wise choices through critical thinking and having a vision for the future. Two typical syllabus statements of this type of outcome were, “This course provides information and strategies necessary to

develop clear academic and professional goals beyond the CC experience,” and “This course is designed to empower the student as he/she attempts to set and maintain realistic personal and educational goals.” Interestingly, despite the relative prominence of developing self-awareness as an overall course goal in the data from the interviews, only one of the course syllabi in the sample listed self-awareness as an intended outcome of the course.

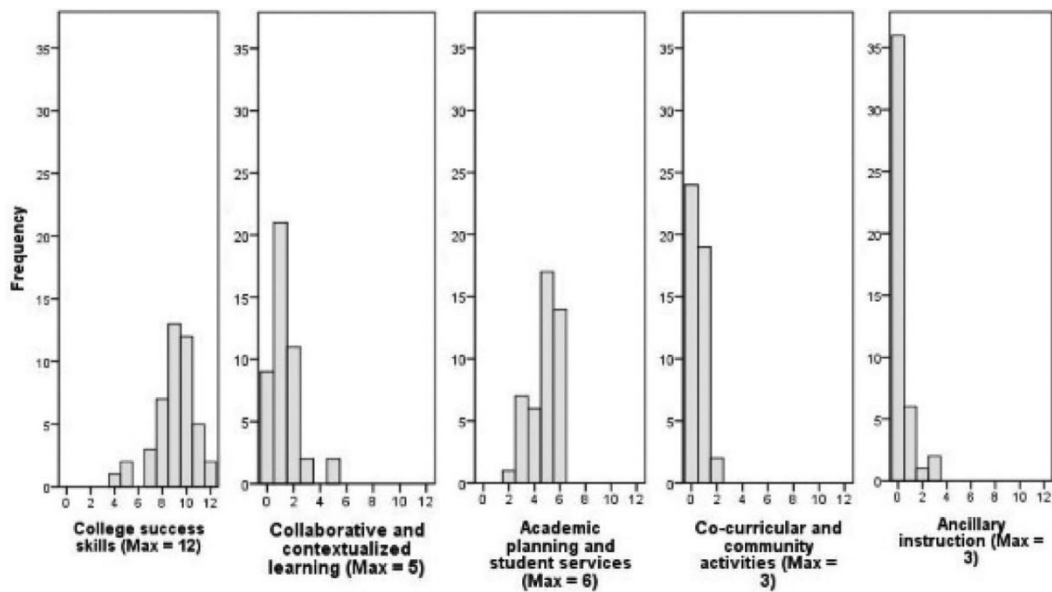
### *Research question 2: features (content) of the course*

The second research question was to understand which means instructors employed to accomplish their purposes for the course. This is the enacted curriculum. To get a broad sense of the course features, we turned first to the quantitized accounting of 29 curricular and pedagogical features listed above in Table 1.

To reduce the data to a more manageable scale, we calculated five factor-based count scores following Hatch and Bohlig (2016) latent typology of success program features. Figure 3 shows the average factor-based score across all 45 courses. These factor scores, however, vary widely and are not normally distributed. Figure 4 displays histograms for each of the feature/content types. Despite, for example, courses including on average 9 out of the 12 different kinds of *college success skills*, there is wide variance around this mean. Two types of course features: *collaborative and contextualized learning* and *academic planning and student services*, both have similar numbers of maximum possible elements in the factor score, yet their distributions are skewed in opposite directions. Similar to what Hatch and Bohlig found, *co-curricular and community activities* and *ancillary instruction* were very infrequently employed.



**Figure 3.** Mean and SD of elements per feature type (enacted content) of SSCs ( $n = 45$ ).



**Figure 4.** Distributions of curricular/pedagogical features per type of feature (enacted content) of SSCs ( $n = 45$ ).

To get a sense of the nuance behind these various course designs, we turned to the responses to IQ2 and the course syllabi. Overall, the instructors were intentional about the methods and activities employed in their courses. Several of the instructors reported their conviction that active, collaborative, student- or learning-centered pedagogy resulted in more or better learning. As a result, many described working hard to find ways other than lecturing of presenting content to ensure that the students in their classrooms were active throughout the class period. They also took advantage of the campus community to provide access to additional resources and tools. What follows are prominent themes that emerged from our qualitative analysis of instructors' responses.

#### *Application to acquire and enact skills for success*

When describing how the activity proceeds day to day, it is clear that the *application* of skills and knowledge areas was foremost in the minds of instructors. Thus, as opposed to the relative lack of attention to skills application noted above in the identification of course purposes, instructors did characterize it as a primary means of accomplishing their goals. Still, instructors emphasized that the skills students practiced were meant for application elsewhere. Some instructors viewed providing opportunities for application as a strategy to increase student engagement in the course—a pedagogical choice of hands-on, active learning, viewed as preferable to lectures.

The idea of application as connecting the concepts and skills covered in the course to real-life situations surfaced a number of times. One instructor strove to make each class “an experience” by first presenting material through a lecture and then asking students to apply it in their own lives or in an activity with classmates. Another provided opportunities

for students to try out the problem-solving strategies in groups after a related lecture. While no instructors referred explicitly to Kolb's experiential cycle (Kolb & Kolb, 2005), this movement from theory (from the text or short lectures), to application (during class activity, as homework, or as part of work for another class), to reflection (as journal writing or through discussion) surfaced often in instructor responses. In fact, reflection was mentioned almost as often as application. This is notable since personal reflection and meaning making do not figure prominently in the literature or broader discourse around SSCs in the same way skills competency and application do. Yet, for instructors, self-reflection is paramount as a way to get there. Self-reflection as a method to accomplish goals is discussed in more detail below.

*Collaboration to learn and practice college navigation*

Collaborative or group activities were frequently referenced as a technique to accomplish course objectives, particularly those related to navigating college life and the higher education system, identifying campus and other resources, transferring, establishing a support network, and decision-making. Group work and group discussions were mentioned by the majority of instructors, making this one of the most prominent in-class activities; one instructor reported that *all* course activities and projects were conducted collaboratively. The reported purposes of team- or group-based activities included getting feedback and bouncing ideas off each other, building a support system and connections to other students, learning from each other, and building a sense of community.

To build a sense of community through shared experiences, instructors also reached out to the campus community and at times the larger community to meet course objectives related to increasing students' ability to navigate college life. This took the form, for instance, of bringing guest speakers from campus offices or the larger community (often related to careers) or by sending students out into the community on field trips or around campus scavenger hunts for campus resources and by holding class meetings in the library, the learning center, or the computer lab.

*Discussions and reflective journaling for college-going identity and self-awareness*

To aid in the development of a college-going identity, instructors socialized students in the behaviors and attitudes valued in academic and professional contexts. Several instructors used published career interest- and self-assessments for students to "explore career paths, practice goal setting, and develop plans for achieving their goals" in utilitarian terms. More prominently, however, in this regard was that instructors framed their approach as getting students to talk about and make sense of their own identity as college-going students, and thus to develop self-awareness and self-efficacy. Such discussions, the instructors reported, also provided opportunities to raise questions that students may be afraid to ask elsewhere, practice academic language, and to connect course topics to real-life experiences. Instructors employed variations such as small-group discussions, "speed dating" style discussions, think-pair-share activities, panel discussions, role-plays, and rotating partners.

Journal writing was a commonly employed to encourage reflection; several instructors reported a heavy emphasis on daily journaling in relation to course readings. Instructors used journals to for a broad range of purposes: to prompt students to consider how a



particular theory or strategy applied to their lives, to reflect on obstacles as a way of problem solving, or to help students think about the behaviors and attitudes that align with success in education. As the foundation for goal setting, students might reflect on why they were in college, their previous educational experiences, their career interests, or their strengths and weaknesses.

### *Research question 3: purposes vis-à-vis features*

By making a case that there is an important distinction between student success purposes and features to accomplish them and then using a framework that is sensitive to the difference, we are indeed able to tease out the differences as we argue above. Yet, few if any of the purposes and features come as a surprise to those familiar with typical curricula of SSCs. The heart of the question then is whether there is a discernable pattern or relationship among course purposes and means employed to achieve them. This is the focus of our third research question.

After conducting the above cross-case analyses, we turned our focus to understanding individual courses. However, given the sheer volume of emergent course purposes and means within cases, we found no justifiable evidence of conclusive patterns that held more broadly. This was the situation whether we used the fine-grained coding of 15 purposes and 29 features, or 5 “meta-purposes” and 5 feature types, or other combinations. Courses with similar desired outcomes employed widely different means to achieve them. Conversely, just as often there were instances of instructors with differing desired outcomes, whose courses set out to achieve them through the same mechanisms. Ultimately, we took this to be evidence that there was no identifiable relationship, generally speaking, in our sample between SSC purposes and means.

For further evidence, we turned to the quantitized measures of curricular/pedagogical features. Using the five factor-based scores of course features (Figure 3), we tested for differences in terms of courses that either espoused a given purpose (Figure 2) versus those that did not. We selected nine of the 15 course purposes where there were at least 10 endorsements so that there was enough variance to compare to nonendorsing courses. This approach set up effectively a  $9 \times 5$  matrix of purposes and features. Because the factor-based scores are nonparametric counts of curricular features, we used a Mann-Whitney  $U$  test (as opposed to a more common  $t$ -test) to determine if there were significant differences in the distribution of scores for any of the pairs in this matrix.

We found only two statistically notable differences, both in terms of the course purpose of *becoming self-aware*. Courses that endorsed this purpose ( $n = 30$ ) utilized, on average, 1.6 of the possible 5 elements of *collaborative and contextualized learning*, whereas courses without this explicit purpose utilized only .8 on average (Mann-Whitney  $U = 138.0$ ,  $Z = 2.24$ ,  $p = .03$ ). Conversely, such courses utilized fewer of the possible six features in *academic planning and student services*: 4.5 vs. 5.3 (Mann-Whitney  $U = 143.5$ ,  $Z = 2.03$ ,  $p = .04$ ). The effect sizes of these differences, respectively  $r = \frac{Z}{\sqrt{N}} = .33$  and  $r = \frac{Z}{\sqrt{N}} = .30$ , are moderate (Newcombe, 2006). This finding may suggest that where self-awareness is a prominent goal or theme of the course, instructors rely on group-based work and contextualized curriculum but downplay, relatively speaking, academic planning, integrated advising, and counseling.

However, with only two differences among 45 test pairs, there is a good chance these were random findings. Instead, the overwhelming quantitative evidence agrees with the qualitative evidence that there was no clear relationship between predominant course purposes and features in our sample.

## Discussion and implications

This study investigated the curricular aspirations of CC SSCs, as currently practiced, compared to their enacted curricular and pedagogical practices. While prior research has established the many goals and topics of these courses (Hatch & Bohlig, 2016; Young & Hopp, 2014), a proposed *curricular activity system* perspective distinguishes desired outcomes from learning objectives and curricular/pedagogical tools, and allows us to investigate patterns among them.

### *Self-awareness and a college-going identity fundamental to the espoused curriculum*

Instructors identified a range of desired student outcomes, in four areas: (a) acquiring and enacting skills, (b) navigating college systems and networks, (c) planning for future/career/educational goals, and (d) developing a college-going identity, self-awareness, and self-efficacy. Whereas these four areas of emphasis for SSCs are not novel on their own, what is notable is the degree to which instructors emphasized the latter goal of self-awareness, self-efficacy, and identity development as a desired long-term outcome and overriding characterization of their course. Self-awareness and identity development are highly valued in humanistic perspectives of education; but they are rarely invoked as fundamental justification for SSCs to the same degree as long-cited instrumentalist and human capital notions of skills, navigation, and planning for careers. In fact, this purpose was not apparent in course syllabi and emerged only through follow-up questioning. There are a few possibilities that may explain why self-awareness and identity development turned out to have this latent saliency. Here we name three possibilities based on our conceptual framework and the literature.

### *Course texts as mediating tools in curricular planning*

Our proposed curricular activity system framework suggests a potential straightforward explanation based on the day-to-day work of educators. Activity theory (Roth & Lee, 2007) and Lattuca and Stark (2009) academic plan posit that action is mediated by the tools one uses. It follows then that adopted course texts can drive curriculum design simply through the act of an instructor mapping a course to book topics and vice-versa.

In our sample of SSCs, one title figured prominently: ten courses in our sample of 45 courses had adopted the text *On Course: Strategies for Creating Success in College and in Life* (Downing, 2017). (For comparison, the next most frequently adopted text, *The Community College Experience* (A. Baldwin, 2013) was in use in just three of the courses in our sample; six course syllabi did not list a required text.) A review of *On Course's* table of contents suggests a perspective on college success compatible with the espoused curriculum that emerged in our findings, one with a strong emphasis on socioemotional components in addition to academic and study skills; in fact, we may be able to partially attribute the

prominence in our findings of the stated course purpose of *becoming self-aware* to the inclusion of a chapter from the Downing text entitled “Gaining Self-Awareness.” The text also includes frequent prompts for reflective journal entries, an activity that figured predominantly in the means instructors employed.

#### *Contextual influence of professional training and roles*

In addition to the potential mediating role of materials is the professional orientation of the instructors themselves. The data set did not include information about professional training of instructors, but it did include information about their job roles. According to a qualitative review of participants’ description of the nature of their appointments, we found that (a) 22% ( $n = 10$ ) had a counseling or advising function and (b) 33% ( $n = 15$ ) had a job title that specified *student development* or *success*. Of the 25 individuals in either case (in the non-mutually exclusive coding scheme), 13 also had formal faculty or instructor appointments, reflecting both a bridging of the traditional academic-student affairs division and a substantial grounding in counseling, advising, and student development orientations for many in their job duties. Given that in the CC sector, professionals in these positions tend to have advanced degrees in counseling and higher education student development (Freitag, 2011), it follows—though needs further empirical research—that they would naturally draw on those knowledge bases in designing SSCs. If so, it would help explain the responses of many of in our sample regarding their developmental goals for students.

#### *Sociocultural contextual influences*

Two final possibilities relate to how faculty may approach the tensions inherent in the missions of the comprehensive CC (Dougherty, 2001). Lifelong learning is an inherent value of the CC ethos (Vaughan, 2006), naturally reflected in its curriculum. Thus, it makes sense that instructors would organize these courses to cover a broad expanse of life goals in the enacted curriculum, even though the purported goals (the espoused curricula) are often stated in terms of the more utilitarian skills and strategies that serve the completion agenda (C. Baldwin, 2017). Another possibility is that instructors, in conceptualizing their courses, intuitively sought to counteract the limitations of instrumentalism that can unintentionally degrade the possibilities of education for self-fulfillment and self-actualization (Williams, 2008).

#### *Self-reflection equally salient as skills training and student support*

SSCs implemented a variety of curricular and pedagogical tools to achieve their aims. The extent to which different types of curricular features are used agreed with patterns noted in prior research (Hatch & Bohlig, 2016), going back to some of the earliest evidence of first-year student seminar topics (Barefoot, 1992). Notably, this means a heavy emphasis on college skills, and academic and student services. While a reliance on tried and true methods appears to be prudent, the lack of innovation and focus (Karp et al., 2012) may also be limiting the potential for high impact. Emerging evidence shows that less commonly used features such as cocurricular/community activities and ancillary instruction are not only relatively more engaging for students (Hatch, 2017) but also more related to

learning goals of self-efficacy, learning strategies, and college knowledge outcomes (Hatch-Tocaimaza et al., 2019).

In the same vein, the predominant focus on skills in the discourse surrounding SSCs today largely sidesteps the vast literature on the importance of college student identity development in student success (Torres et al., 2009). Instructors recognized the value of this aspect in their enacted curriculum, even though it was not at first apparent in their espoused curriculum. Evidence in our study leads us to argue this aspect is no less relevant to CC settings, and deserves closer consideration in the student success and HIP literature.

### ***Consequences of unarticulated purposes vis-à-vis means***

As opposed to instructors' thoughtful articulation of course purposes and selection of activities, we found little evidence, whether qualitative or quantitative, that pointed to a consistent relationship between them. This may be due to a common tendency, noted in the literature (Karp et al., 2012), of instructors and curriculum planners to continually add substantially more content to student success interventions than originally envisioned. Our findings, though, show that on average instructors articulated about five of the possible 15 different purposes across all courses. In a given academic term, this does not appear an unreasonable number of objectives. The conceptual framing of our study allows us to infer that expansive course curricula might therefore be partly a function of unexamined distinctions between purposes and means, something that is particularly confounding for SSCs.

We propose that this is an inherent structural barrier to the crafting of SSCs that may limit their potential. By packing SSCs with undifferentiated goals and curricular means, colleges may risk bringing about an unintended consequence of the completion agenda: superficial coverage rather than meaningful learning (Lester, 2014). Our findings agree with recommendations to substantially narrow the scope of SSCs (Karp et al., 2012), and it suggests an important way to do so through a disciplined inventory and critique enabled via a new conceptual understanding of how the pieces relate to each other.

### **Conclusion and implications for practice and future research**

The present study contributes to our understanding by problematizing the current understanding of their purposes and features as currently practiced. Despite the long-standing assumption that the nature of SSCs is well established, this study suggests that in practice, there is ambiguity regarding the relationship of purposes and features. Therefore, researchers and practitioners alike would do well to pose fundamental questions to distinguish them, rather than accepting commonly held definitions and propagating program design that often occurs through institutional isomorphism (Morphew, 2009).

By positing a curricular activity system, a hybrid sociocultural frame of activity theory (Roth & Lee, 2007; Yamagata-Lynch, 2010) and Lattuca and Stark (2009) academic plan, we offer a new model that could potentially be used by researchers and practitioners alike in making sense of the curriculum creation process. We propose that a curricular activity system as a useful framework for SSCs for at least two reasons. First, because both models are based on the day-to-day actual work that educators do. Lattuca and Stark's academic plan reveals the complexity of influences on curriculum but provides a process to contend with

them. Activity theory, on the other hand, is particularly good at aiding work groups in identifying and addressing misalignments and tensions that may limit an activity from achieving its full potential (Engeström, 2010). Secondly, as we show here, it is also particularly good at breaking through the confounding of outcomes, learning objectives, and tools that characterize SSCs. For CCs and their students who pursue multiple, even sometimes conflicting, educational purposes, any means to make sense of them is of value.

Relatively few students at CCs participate in SSCs despite their wide implementation. Given the substantial barriers that many CC students face in starting right and achieving their higher education goals, it is imperative that the means to foster student success, including SSCs to the extent they are useful, are maximized, without gaps between the espoused and enacted curriculum. This study provides a snapshot of current practice, revealing opportunities to both understand the gap and potential tools to close it, including how to rethink how we understand it.

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