A Review of the Student Engagement Literature

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Abstract

This article reviews the literature of student engagement as it is defined for K-12 and higher education settings. This article first identifies the various definitions of engagement, and then describes the reasons for growing practitioner and academic interest to increase student engagement. The article concludes with a review of some studies of student engagement, engagement practices that improve student learning, and a review of a national test used to measure engagement levels at institutions of higher education.

Student Engagement

Colleges are looking for ways to promote student success and help students gain the most from their higher education experience. Increasingly, institutions are looking for ways to encourage student engagement in formal curricular and informal co-curricular activities. Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, and Gonyea (2007) summarize research that identifies the key importance engagement behaviors have on student outcomes by stating, “What students do during college counts more in terms of what they learn and whether they persist in college than who they are or even where they go to college” (p.7). As the benefits of engagement are identified, educators place increased importance on improving student engagement to increase positive student outcomes.

A number of recommendations have been made to improve institutional, faculty, and student practices to increase student engagement. Influential works, such as Chickering and Gamson’s (1987) “Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education” and Chickering and Kuh’s (2005) “Promoting Student Success: Creating Conditions so Every Student Can Learn,” offer recommendations to improve general student learning and positive outcomes for students. The recommendations by these researchers describe ways for institutions to encourage student interaction, or engagement, with course content, faculty, staff, and other students.

Engagement Defined: Behavioral, Emotional, and Cognitive Distinctions

Engagement principles have been generally defined since the 1950s and 1960s, but not systematically categorized until recently. Engagement is still loosely defined, but a wave of current research is producing clarity around the construct. This section will take a brief look at
the history of the concept of student engagement. Definitions of engagement will be explored then specifically defined into behavioral, emotional, and cognitive realms.

Bowen’s (1977) classic work, “Goals: The Intended Outcomes of Higher Education” outlines generally agreed upon goals of higher education as well as the influence students’ behavior and environmental factors have on student outcomes. He narrows the general goals of higher education to “cognitive learning, effective development, and practical competence” (p. 27) and notes the complexity of learning and the influence of intertwining campus activities on students. “All three types of goals may be achieved in part from both formal instruction and extracurricular experience” (1977, p.27). Student academic achievement is positively influenced by formal activities such as faculty instruction (Ahlfeldt, Mehta, & Sellnow, 2005), or informal experiences such as living environments (Eck, Edge, & Stephenson, 2007). Faculty and staff formally engage students in class and informally outside of class. Students formally engage with other students in class and informally outside of class. Students also have different levels of motivation and implement different learning strategies. This complex set of behaviors and experiences influences student outcomes in a way that is generally described as “engagement.”

Bowen (2005) notes the growing importance engagement has as a distinguishing factor of the most educationally effective practices. Despite a growing focus by institutions to implement effective engagement practices, a unified definition of engagement has not congealed. Books and articles on student engagement range from anecdotes to empirical studies. An early edited work by Yamamoto (1968), The College Student and His Culture: An Analysis, indirectly addresses engagement related issues. In this work, the term student engagement is not used but the areas of engagement related to academic interest and inquiry are similar. Engagement related theories of the 1950s and 1960s, cited in this work, include thoughts on the effects on students of teaching methods, learning environments, student culture, peer influence, and extracurricular activities. Sandeen (2003) offers personal anecdotes of student engagement. However, his use of the term engagement is broad and includes any student interaction with faculty and administrators.

The definition of engagement is being redefined in more specific ways as institutions examine multiple aspects of engagement in pursuit of increased levels on campus. Bryson and Hand (2007) note the complex nature of engagement and call for a multifaceted approach to improving student engagement. Krause and Coates (2008) call for a definition that encapsulates the multi-dimensional aspects of engagement. Glanville and Wildhagen (2007) acknowledge there is a debate over how to define engagement, either as a single or multi-dimensional concept state. The authors conclude, “engagement should be measured as a multidimensional concept” (p.1019) divided into behavioral and psychological segments. Horstmanhof and Zimitat (2007) similarly acknowledge the psychological and behavioral elements of engagement. Behavioral engagement refers to time spent studying or asking teachers for help, and psychological engagement refers to the value students place on learning. Vadenboncoeur (2006) identified in the literature formal and informal aspects of student engagement. Formal student engagement pertains to in-class settings, while informal engagement broadly encompasses out of class activities that range from after school programs to learning that occurs in any social setting. Vadenboncoeur stresses the importance of informal student engagement that constitute the bulk of students’ time.

Fredericks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004) propose a definition of engagement made up of behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions. Their work synthesizes a multitude of ideas and definitions surrounding engagement and condensed the term into three main categories:
behavioral, emotional, and cognitive. These three categories in turn comprise the “meta construct” of engagement. While their paper addresses mostly K-12 applications of engagement theory, the conceptual definitions of engagement have implications for institutions of higher education.

Behavioral engagement. Behavioral engagement consists of students’ involvement in academic and social activities. Three main categories of behavioral engagement include positive conduct, involvement in learning, and participation in school related activities (Fredericks et al. 2004). Positive conduct includes following class rules. Involvement in learning and academic tasks includes student behaviors related to concentration, attention, persistence, effort, asking questions, and contributing to class discussions. Participation in school-related activities includes athletics or school government.

Emotional engagement. Emotional engagement is comprised of students’ attitudes, interests, and values particularly related to positive or negative interactions with faculty, staff, students, academics, or the institution (Fredericks et al., 2004). Emotional engagement creates ties with institutions and builds students’ desire to work. Three main components include students’ affective reactions, emotional reactions, and school identification. Affective reactions in the classroom include student interest, boredom, anxiety, sadness, and happiness. Emotional reactions are positive or negative feelings toward the institution and instructors. School identification pertains to students’ feelings of belonging and importance within the institutional environment.

Cognitive engagement. Cognitive engagement, according to Fredericks et al. (2004), is divided into two components: psychological and cognitive. The psychological component encompasses motivational goals and self-regulated learning as it relates to investment, thoughtfulness, and willingness to put in the effort to comprehend complex ideas and master difficult skills. The psychological component stresses students’ investment in learning and motivation to learn. The cognitive component involves self-regulated learning, metacognition, application of learning strategies, and “being strategic” in thinking and studying.

The Importance of Engagement

Interest in student engagement levels grows, as it is an acknowledged way for students to experience increased learning and improved outcomes from an educational institution. This section outlines some benefits of student engagement, institutional practices that encourage engagement, and the shared responsibility of faculty and staff to encourage student engagement.

Educational organizations and individual researchers affirm the shared responsibility of faculty and professional staff to encourage engagement among students. Reports issued by national organizations such as the American College Personnel Association (ACPA, 1996) and the Joint Task Force on Student Learning (1998) acknowledge the shared responsibility of academic and non-academic staff for student learning (Bresciani, Zelna, & Anderson, 2004).

Growing research shows faculty and student practices influence the positive outcomes students receive from time spent attending an institution of higher education. Educators and
researchers acknowledge increased levels of student engagement have a significant positive influence on student learning and outcomes (Carini, Kuh, & Klein, 2006; Kuh et al., 2007; Glanville & Wildhagen, 2007). Astin’s (1984) input-environment-outcome (I-E-O) model of student involvement and learning states that the quality and quantity of student interactions directly influences student levels of learning and development. Pascarella and Terenzini’s (2005) review of the literature support Astin’s theory and report “a substantial amount of both experimental and correlation evidence suggests that active student involvement in learning has a positive impact on the acquisition of course content” (p. 101). Glanville and Wildhagen’s (2007) findings suggest student engagement decreases K-12 student dropout rates.

Improved student learning is influenced by practitioners and the methods they use to engage student learning. Engagement practices that stem from faculty, staff, and student actions are found to help students develop intellectually and personally (Ahlfeldt et al., 2005; Anderman & Kaplan, 2008; Astin, 1985; Eck et al., 2007; Gray & Madson, 2007; Reeve, Jang, Carrell, Jeon, & Barch, 2004, Kuh & Gonyea, 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Temple & Barnett, 2007; Ullah & Wilson, 2007; Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005).

**Studies of Student Engagement**

A number of research studies examine the influence engagement behaviors have on students. This section contains research studies focusing on the factors that influence student engagement, followed by a section that includes faculty influences on student engagement levels. The third section reviews a national assessment test of student engagement. This third section concludes with a sample of studies that examine engagement differences among college student groups.

**Influences on Student Engagement Levels**

Numerous factors influence student change that comes about because of a college education. After a review of student outcomes, Pascarella (1991) comments that the “real quality in undergraduate education resides more in what we do programmatically than in just what resources we have” (p. 459). Davis and Murrell’s (1993) study found that it is the level of student effort placed into academic and social experiences that most influences student gains. Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, and Whitt (2005) explain the changes a student will undergo during college are due to the degree of involvement in academic and extracurricular activities. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) note increased student effort with course content increases the “level of knowledge acquisition and general cognitive growth” (p. 608).

Researchers also examined the influence of co-curricular factors on student engagement levels. Kuh and Gonyea (2005) found student spirituality has a neutral to mild positive influence on engagement related behaviors. A study of 403 students at a regional southern university found residing in living-learning communities has a positive influence on the academic success of students who reside in them (Eck et al., 2007). Anderman and Kaplan’s (2008) literature review of academic motivation identified the important role interpersonal relationships play in encouraging student motivation and learning.
The National Survey of Student Engagement

Increasingly, colleges and universities assess student levels of engagement through use of student self-assessment surveys, such as the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE, 2009). Kuh et al. (2005) define an educationally effective college or university as one that focuses “students’ energies toward appropriate activities and engage [sic] them at a high degree in these activities” (p.9). A first step in identifying whether students are involved in these activities, or practices, is for institutions or departments to assess where they currently are at in offering certain “value added” engagement activities, and how much students are using these engagement related activities. NSSE is used to assess the campus climate and specifically identify ways to enrich a campuses’ educational effectiveness for students.

The purpose of NSSE is to measure students’ engagement behaviors such as time spent studying for class or the amount of interaction with other students, faculty, and staff. The NSSE survey (The College Student Report) also gathers information concerning students’ background, including degree major. Findings from the NSSE survey identify the status of institutions’ levels of student engagement and are used to improve practices that may increase engagement among students (NSSE, 2009).

Research that used NSSE data. NSSE survey results have been used to measure engagement and its impact on college readiness (Kuh, 2007), instructional methods (Ahlfeldt et al., 2005), student learning (Carini et al., 2006), grades and persistence (Kuh et al., 2007), and faculty influence on student engagement levels (Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005). NSSE data are also used by researchers to identify characteristics among student groups, such as first generation and low income students (Filkins & Doyle, 2002), American and international students (Zhao, Kuh, & Carini, 2005), gender differences (Harper, Carini, Bridges, & Hayek, 2004), Greek letter students (Hayek, Carini, O’Day, & Kuh, 2002), and student athletes (Umbach, Palmer, Kuh, & Hannah, 2006).

Summary

Engagement is an area of growing interest by both educational practitioners and researchers as evident in the preceding literature review of student engagement. Engagement is a term with a broad definition that can make analysis of engagement related topics muddled by the lack of clarity of the term. Though, there have been efforts to consolidate the term, studies of student engagement at institutions of higher education, examined the influence of faculty, staff, and the students themselves on student engagement, learning levels, and the differences among college group.

References


