Student Involvement/Engagement in Higher Education Based on Student Origin

Jalynn Roberts.
University of Southern Mississippi
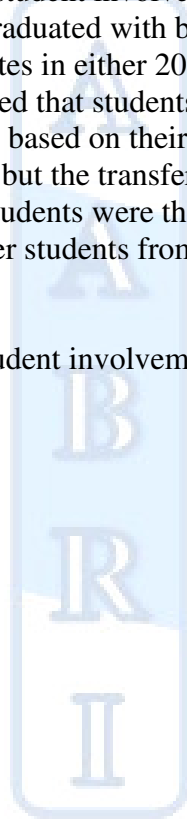
Mary Nell McNeese
University of Southern Mississippi

Abstract

This research study investigated student involvement/engagement based on educational origin. The 190 students in the sample graduated with bachelors' degrees from a public university in the southeastern United States in either 2006 or 2007.

Results of the data analysis showed that students were involved/engaged at their university on statistically different levels based on their educational origin. Indigenous students were different from the transfer students but the transfer students were the same regardless from where they originated. The indigenous students were the most involved, followed by transfers from junior/community colleges. Transfer students from four-year colleges and universities were the least involved/engaged.

Keywords: post-secondary education, student involvement/engagement, student retention, student persistence

Introduction

All across our country, colleges and universities face an ever-increasing problem of student attrition. The typical six-year graduation rate for most public institutions in the United States ranges between 50 – 56 % (Mortenson, 2005; Crosling, Thomas, and Heagney, 2008; and Berkner, He, and Cataldi, 2002). However, the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) found the national six-year graduation rate for public universities to be slightly higher, at 58% (Astin & Oseguera, 2002). What is interesting about these statistics is that nearly half of all undergraduate students who enter public universities will not graduate within six years. Although institutions have responded to this quandary by implementing additional programs and services, student retention rates have not substantially improved (Seidman, 2005a).

Mary Stuart Hunter (2006), Director of Administration at the National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition at the University of South Carolina—Columbia, contends, "Institutions in all sectors of higher education are attempting to increase student success by focusing on student retention" (p. 5). This retention problem affects both the students and the institutions they leave who feel the added economic burden caused by their premature departures. Indeed, the impact of student attrition extends beyond institutions of higher learning to the nation itself. Seidman (2005a) explains,

> A strong, vibrant, varied, and expanding national economy depends in
> part on the educational attainment of its citizens. A nation that values
> and promotes the educational attainment of its citizens is a nation that is
> concerned with its ability to compete in the global economy. (p. *xi*)

Retention is a campus-based phenomenon, and different types of campuses tend to attract different types of students (Berger & Lyon, 2005). According to Astin (1990), retention rates vary by campus due to the differences in the types of students attracted and recruited by certain schools, and it is imperative that institutions provide an environment and climate that fit well with their particular student populations. Therefore, it is the responsibility of particular colleges and universities to graduate the students who enroll at their institutions, and "each institution must tailor retention to fit the specific needs of its students and the context of that particular institutional environment" (Berger & Lyon, 2005, p. 3). Based on this premise the university, that is the focus of this study, developed an avenue of communication with its former students to obtain feedback specific to that institution.

While the literature on student retention focuses on at least four key contributing factors: student involvement/engagement; student interactions with faculty, administrators, and staff; student learning experiences; and student support services, the present study will focus solely on student involvement/engagement.

Student Involvement/Engagement

Several theories have emerged over the last several decades explaining the relationship between student retention and involvement. Much research by Astin revolves around the impact of student involvement on student outcomes in college, and his essential assertion is that students must be actively engaged in their surroundings in order to learn and grow in college (Evans, Forney, and Guido-DiBrito, 1998). Astin (1984) defines involvement as "the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience" (p. 297).

Schlossberg's theory on marginality and mattering is also an important concept recognized in college student success (Evans et al., 1998). According to Schlossberg, students feel marginalized when they feel as if they do not fit it in, which leads to negative outcomes such as "self-consciousness, irritability, and depression" (Evans et al., 1998, p. 27). Feeling marginalized causes students to wonder if they "matter to someone else" (Schlossberg, 1989, p. 9). Schlossberg emphasizes the imperative that post-secondary institutions make students feel significant since that feeling precedes student involvement in college activities and programs.

The first step to becoming engaged and involved on college campuses is for students to interact with their peers. According to Schlossberg's theory, student-peer interaction is imperative if participating in campus activities and student organizations is to be meaningful. These interactions reinforce academic learning and also permeate into other areas of college life such "as discussing policies and issues related to campus activities; having serious discussions about religious, philosophical, or political beliefs; discussing personal problems; discussing the arts, science, technology, or international relations; and talking about an idea brought up in class" (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p. 121). While it is true that students must experience academic success to remain in college, it is also vital that they become involved and engaged in other areas of college life. In fact, Gerdes and Mallinckrodt (1994) state that "personal adjustment and integration into the social fabric of campus life plays a role at least as important as academic factors in student retention" (p. 286).

From this research, it seems evident that students must become engaged in experiences which promote both academic and social reinforcement. According to Tinto (1993), however, "…it is entirely possible for individuals to achieve integration in the academic system of the college without doing so in the social domain" (p. 120). Additionally, Tinto found that students who do not become socially integrated may or may not suffer from persistence issues, depending on the individual. Therefore, failure to become involved in campus activities, organizations, and extracurricular activities, which promote involvement and integration of college life, can lead to higher chances of attrition for some students.

One of the most widely known types of college organizations are Greek organizations. Some higher education professionals are somewhat dubious regarding the impact of these organizations on academics, as Pike reported in a 2000 study. Pascarella, Flowers and Whitt (2001) discovered, however, that the negative effects of Greek affiliation decreased after the first year, and for sororities yielded increases in writing skills and scientific reasoning. Although the findings regarding the impact on academics is somewhat ambivalent, Pike and Askew (1990) clearly conclude that belonging to these Greek organizations contribute psychologically to a student's sense of community and also increase levels of involvement on college campuses. When students feel like they are a part of the campus community, the more likely they are to feel loyal towards their institution and persist (Bean, 2005).

Additionally, students become involved and engaged in campus life is through service learning. Astin, Sax, and Avalos (1999) indicated that higher education administrators are placing more emphasis on service learning. Service learning improves students' grades and enables them to better apply principles from the course to real-world experiences and situations (Markus, Howard, & King, 1993). However, the most important discovery about service learning might be what Berson and Younkin reported in their 1998 study (as cited in Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005): students who participated in required service learning as an integral part of their coursework and program developed relationships with fellow students and felt more integrated with their programs and academic communities.

Another way students become involved in campus life is through organizations and experiences which promote diversity. As cited in Pascarella and Terenzini (2005), Gurin purports that involvement in diversity experiences enhances student learning, and that the level of student body diversity predicts the degree of student involvement in diversity experiences. Examples of those types of experiences include attending racial-cultural awareness workshops, discussing racial issues in groups, socializing with different racial/ethnic groups on campus, and developing close friendships with students who belong to different races/ethnicities. More importantly, involvement in these various diversity experiences positively effected student learning (Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005). Students from this same study also self-reported gains in course knowledge and skills, and felt more likely to persist until graduation. Therefore, the importance of diversity experiences cannot be overlooked as a vital aspect of involvement and engagement on the college campus.

Finally, students may become involved and engaged in campus life is through participating in athletics (organized or intramural), and extracurricular activities. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) report that students who participate in athletics (especially men who play basketball and football) consistently scored higher on standard measures of learning than their non-athletic peers. The authors claimed that women who participated in athletics did not experience any significant negative effects when compared to their non-athletic counterparts, except in the area of reading comprehension during the third year of college. Van Etten, Pressley, McInerney and Liem (2008) found that college seniors listed extracurricular activities as an important factor in their college persistence.

Origin of Students and Student Retention

While many students begin their college experience at the same institution from which they will eventually graduate, other students transfer to that institution. Just like new first-time first-year students, these transfer students are entering a new institution with which they are unfamiliar. Most institutions give far less attention to transfer students than to their cohorts (Kuh et al., 2005). Therefore, students who transfer to the university must acclimate themselves with their new institution without as much assistance as is often provided to new incoming students, including becoming familiar with their instructors, staff, new friends, and other varying nuances of the institution. These transfer students often do not know the resources available to them and the opportunities for engagement and involvement in campus activities. As a result, transfer students often face difficulty becoming involved and engaged socially and sometimes academically at the university. This is because transfer students have little in common with current students at the universities to which they transfer and usually find it difficult to connect with other transfer students (Kuh et. al, 2005). Consequently, transfer students often feel disconnected from their institutions. Tinto (1993) holds that many students who transfer to the university from junior and community colleges will be much more limited with their involvement and engagement in campus activities, learning experiences, and also interactions with other students.

The university in this study receives most of its students as transfers from junior/community colleges or other colleges and universities. Over 60% of the university's student population is composed of such students. It is important for all universities, especially those like the one in this study, to assist transfer students in acclimating to their new institution, communicating to them the importance of becoming involved and engaged both academically

and socially. This involvement/engagement can sometimes be challenging for transfer students, who are often overwhelmed when entering a new institution and also have other competing forces for their time, such as jobs and family (Tinto, 1993). However, Kuh et al (2005) contend that it is vitally important for these students to become involved and engaged at their institutions. Efforts must be made so transfer students do not merely view the university as a place to complete their degree. Kuh et al. also argue for the implementation of programs specifically for transfer students to help these students become active members in the university community. When students feel connected and involved with their institutions, they are more likely to persist and graduate (Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005).

The present study addressed the following research question: is there a statistically significant difference in student involvement/engagement based on whether a student is indigenous to a university or transfers there from either a junior/community college or from a four year college/university. When students come into the university from diverse backgrounds, does it make a difference in their level of involvement/engagement?

Methodology

Participants

Two thousand two hundred undergraduate students who had graduated from a public university in the southeastern United States in either 2006 or 2007 were sampled. Approximately 234 undergraduates (approximately 10%) between 20 and 79 years of age responded to the online invitation to participate in this study.

Instrument

An online questionnaire was created using an online surveying software tool by the university's Office of Institutional Effectiveness. This questionnaire was constructed based on the research literature in the field of student satisfaction and retention.

The following demographic information was requested: gender, age, race/ethnicity, transfer status, number of semesters attended, full/part time student status, G.P.A., hours spent working per week while a student, campus attended, commuting distance, academic major, and current employment status and salary. Additionally, the survey instrument measured the level of student satisfaction in a number of areas which are related to student retention: involvement and engagement in university experiences, learning experiences in academic coursework, on-campus student support services, and faculty availability/approachability.

The questionnaire was field-tested a few months prior to administration by experts who confirmed its content validity in focus group meetings. The focus group participants made recommendations regarding the aesthetics of the survey instrument, and the appropriate changes were made. The reliability of the data was assessed using Cronbach's alpha on the Likert scale student satisfaction questions. That assessment yielded an alpha of .77 for involvement and engagement university experiences. Based on the reliability results, the instrument was considered to yield reliable data.

Procedures

The potential participants were emailed the link in February 2008 and were given until the end of March 2008 to complete the questionnaires. Informed consent statements were also included in that email. The questionnaires took approximately ten minutes to complete. When the survey window closed, the data from were downloaded into Excel and imported into SPSS software for storage and analysis. The current researchers obtained permission from the university's Institutional Research Board (IRB) to use these data collected in this research study.

Results

One hundred ninety subjects responded to questions about student involvement/engagement. Students indigenous to the university had a mean of 20.27, with a standard deviation of 7.85, while the transfers from junior/community colleges had a mean of 13.35 and a standard deviation of 7. By contrast the transfers from other colleges/universities had a mean of 11.95 and a standard deviation of 6.89.

An Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was conducted to evaluate the differences in student involvement/engagement based on how the students entered the university. The independent variable, the student origin factor, included three levels: indigenous to the university, transfer from a junior/community college, and transfer from another four year college/university. The dependent variable was the student involvement/engagement variable. The assumption of equality of error variances was met, Levene's $F(2, 187) = .04$, $p = .97$.

The ANOVA was significant, $F(2, 187) = 24.96$, *p<.001*, partial $\eta^2 = .21$, observed power $= 1$. Post-hoc comparisons showed that the indigenous students were different from the transfer students but the transfer students were statistically equal regardless from where they originated. The indigenous students were the most involved, followed by transfers from junior/community colleges. Students from other four year colleges and universities were the least involved/engaged.

Discussion

The results of the present study showed that there was a statistically significant difference in student involvement/engagement based on whether a student was indigenous to a university or transferred there from either a junior/community college or a four year college/university. Based on the results of this study, the institution should implement tailored programs to assist transfer students when acclimating to a new institutional environment. These efforts concur with retention research conducted by Berger and Lyon (2005). Therefore, higher education administrators should work diligently to provide opportunities for students to get involved with campus organizations and activities.

The institution on which this study is based receives a larger proportion of transfer students than most other four year institutions. These transfer students have been less involved/engaged, which is important because those students often feel marginalized and experience other negative consequences (Evans et al., 1998; Schlossberg, 1989). While transfer students often view their institution as merely a place to take courses, Tinto (1993) purports that academic engagement alone is not enough to help some students persist. Social integration and involvement provide counterbalance. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) also report that students

who are involved and engaged (e.g. athletics, extracurricular activities) at their institution are more likely to experience success in the classroom and complete their academic studies. Based on the importance of student involvement/engagement, this institution must spend most of efforts on helping transfer students become involved/engaged in not only their learning experiences, but also campus life, activities, etc.

Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) indicate that service learning plays an integral role in student engagement. Specifically, students who participate in service learning often earn better course grades and are better able to apply skills learned in their courses. Additionally, these students form deeper relationships with fellow students and feel more integrated with their communities. Tinto (1993) elaborates that interactions among students should include discussing policies and issues related to campus activities, having serious discussions about religious, philosophical, or political beliefs, discussing personal problems, discussing the arts, sciences, technology, or international relations, and discussing class ideas. While these discussions can sometimes occur inside the classroom, Tinto states they extend beyond the classroom as well. Based on this research, academic programs at the university that is the subject of this study should emphasize the importance of service learning to transfer students and their faculty, ensuring that they focus on building relationships with other students while participating in service learning projects.

Diversity experiences are also essential in helping transfer students acclimate to a new institutional environment, which includes becoming familiar with the various groups that comprise the student population. Examples include attending racial/cultural workshops and also socializing and establishing relationships. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) concluded that students reported higher gains in academic skills and knowledge and were more likely to graduate than cohorts who did not participate in enriching diversity experiences. While most higher education professionals realize that student diversity should be encouraged in the classroom, they also need to realize that diversity experiences outside the classrooms should also be promoted and supported.

When students transfer to new institution, they often are unaware of all the campus resources and activities available. These students also find it challenging to connect to both the indigenous and other transfer students (Kuh et. al, 2005). The institution in this study currently has a transfer student association to provide opportunities for transfer students to meet and support each other. Also, the institution provides a list of both academic and campus resources (along with their web pages) that will help students become involved in campus life. Additionally, the institution publishes a newsletter for transfer students each semester that includes a list of important dates, major events, and how to become involved in activities if they are uncertain about where to start.

Recently, the university being studied developed a strategic initiative that includes the creation of "a Student Success Center which brings together all facets of student affairs and academic affairs in a university think tank collaboration. Representatives from the Office of First Year Experience, Student Support Services, Division of Undergraduate Studies, Student Government Association (SGA) and Southern Miss Activities Council (SMAC) are teaming with administration officials to establish a blueprint" for the development of this center (Arnold, 2009). Also, the university has initiated "a late-night programming effort" that will be held periodically throughout the academic year at a restaurant on campus and will include "live entertainment, food and beverages" (Arnold, 2009). While planning for this initiative, administrators wanted to involve as many students as possible. "One thing our committee

looked at from the start was how to reach out to more students. And we wanted something they could do right here on campus. If a student wants to come here and earn a degree, then we want to make sure we provide that student with the support needed to help them achieve that goal" (Arnold, 2009).

However, Jones (2001) asserted that merely offering such resources is inadequate to help students succeed and argues that students must be compelled to utilize such resources. Jones also suggested constant collaborative activities between administrators, professors and student support services. This includes the incorporation of support services or other supportive resources into class curriculum, class visits to support centers, or simply encouraging students to take advantage of support services and become involved in campus activities. When transfer students utilize resources and participate in campus activities, they become more involved and connected with their institution.

Tinto (1993) stated that "Nowhere is the importance of student involvement more evident than in and around the classrooms of the college" (p. 132). It is important that faculty use their classrooms as gateways to help students become engaged in their respective programs through activities and other learning experiences. While most student engagement still occurs in the classroom, Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, et al. (2005), report that some institutions have been able to implement activities outside of the classroom to help improve both student involvement and engagement. Tinto (1993) asserts, "Classrooms can be understood as smaller educational communities that serve as both gateways to and intersections for the broader academic and social communities of the college" (p.133).

Indeed, it is this broader involvement with the college at both the social and academic levels that is so vital to the student's persistence. While Tinto (1993) reports that academic involvement is more important than social involvement for almost all colleges and universities, he also claims that academic engagement alone is not enough to help some students persist. Tinto goes to say that social integration and involvement may possibly counterbalance the absence of academic involvement. Either way, the importance of student engagement and involvement cannot be overemphasized, and it is a necessary part of student development and persistence, and it is imperative that college professionals make efforts to engage students in activities which will allow them to become involved in the college community. Tinto best summarizes the importance of student involvement on student learning: "In this manner, the argument about student learning moves beyond the simplistic notion that students are alone responsible for their own effort to the more complex notion that institutions also influence the quality of student effort via their capacity to involve students with other members of the institution in the learning process" (Tinto, 1993, p. 132).

Retention continues to be an important issue facing our colleges and universities--for the students, institutions, and the nation. Not only are institutions impacted financially when students leave, but students who leave college without graduating often accumulate large amounts of debt. According to Schuh and Ross (2005), the average college student borrows over four-thousand dollars, and more students are borrowing money now to pay for college than any other time. To complicate matters, when students do not graduate and have nothing to show for these debts, they often become disenfranchised with higher education and discourage others who are considering attending college.

Colleges and universities are responding to these challenges by constantly seeking new ways to help ensure the success of their students. According to Tinto (2005), more research is needed so that a more powerful theory can be developed which better explains why students

leave college. He contends that current theories and formulas are only rough predictors of departure and are also limited in what they can tell us about the forces that shape and impact student persistence. Furthermore, Miller (2005b) claims that current persistence rates point to a problem, and action is needed now to address and resolve student persistence issues so students can thrive and succeed in college (Kuh, 2007).

Limitations

- The present study was limited to the 2006 and 2007 academic years from a single university in the Southeastern United States and therefore cannot be generalized beyond that scope.
- Only students who graduated with a bachelor's degree were included in this study. Students who dropped out or stopped out were not available for participation in the study.
- The wording of the questions in the instrument limited the participants' responses.
- The questionnaire was sent to potential participants via online delivery. Therefore, any recent graduates without computer and internet access could not participate.

Recommendations for Future Research

- Broaden the scope of the study to include other institutions in other regions of the United States.
- Enlarge the study to include graduate students who completed their degrees.
- Collect data from students who did not complete their degrees.

Summary

Research shows that as levels of student involvement/engagement increase, so does student retention in higher education. Several post-secondary activities have been related to student retention: peer interactions inside and outside of the classroom, membership in Greek organizations, participation in service learning projects, involvement in athletics and extracurricular activities, and diversity experiences.

Transfer students, whether from a junior/community college or from a four year college/university tend to become involved/engaged in campus life at lower rates than indigenous students. Post-secondary institutions should consider special services to such students to increase student retention.

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