

We all know the importance of student engagement to student learning.

Gavin W. Henning argues that the upside doesn't end there . . .

the institution as a whole also benefits.

*By Gavin W. Henning*

# Leveraging Student Engagement for Student and Institutional Success

**T**HE POSITIVE IMPACT OF ENGAGEMENT ON COLLEGE-STUDENT SUCCESS has been demonstrated conclusively by a variety of researchers in higher education. Many of us are familiar with the groundbreaking work of Vincent Tinto, George Kuh, Sean Harper, and Stephen Quaye, to name just a few of the big names in the field. However, student success is not the only result of such engagement; I argue in this piece that student engagement can also improve institutional success.

## ENGAGEMENT AS A PROCESS FOR INCREASING STUDENT SUCCESS

FIRST, IT IS IMPORTANT TO CLARIFY what I mean by “student engagement.” In 2007, George Kuh, Jillian Kinzie, Jennifer A. Buckley, Brian K. Bridges, and John C. Hayek defined student engagement as the time and effort students devote to activities that are empirically linked to desired outcomes of college. Kuh and his coauthors claimed that

while students have a responsibility to create their own opportunities for engagement, institutions should be intentional about how they allocate and employ resources to foster engagement and develop a process that results in improved student outcomes. In this way, students and institutions share a role in creating and supporting the kind of engaging activities that lead to improved student outcomes.

In 2009, Sean Harper and Stephen Quaye summarized the research regarding the benefits of student engagement, which include academic performance, persistence, cognitive development, psychosocial development, moral and ethical development, college adjustment, practical competence, skills transferability, and acquisition of social capital. With all of these positive benefits of student engagement, colleges and universities are increasingly using engagement as a conceptual framework for structuring the student experience.

Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, and Hayek organized a framework for engagement around a list of high-impact practices. These practices are educationally purposeful activities that include high time-on-task for

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students, require a high quality of effort, and involve active learning and involvement. These high-impact practices include first-year seminars, learning communities, common intellectual experiences, writing-intensive courses, service learning, diversity experiences, undergraduate research, study abroad, internships and other field placements, and senior capstone experiences.

Such high-impact practices require a great deal of institutional collaboration. They can occur inside and outside the classroom. In some instances, faculty members provide research opportunities to undergraduate students across disciplines; in others, multicultural student affairs offices implement diversity activities such as “Crossing the Line” from Adam Fletcher’s *FireStarter Youth Power Curriculum* and “Intergroup Dialogue” from David Louis Schoem and Sylvia Hurtado’s *Intergroup Dialogue: Deliberative Democracy in School, College, Community, and Workplace*. Faculty and staff collaborate on creating learning communities in residence halls and classrooms, involving clubs and organizations, and providing leadership opportunities. For some high-impact practices, career development offices connect students with internship opportunities to apply their knowledge in practical settings. Faculty members then assist these students to integrate their experiences into capstone projects. Across the range of high-impact practices, many different members of a campus community have responsibilities. Everyone plays a vital role in fostering student engagement and helping students achieve desired outcomes of college attendance.

## ENGAGEMENT AS A PROCESS FOR INCREASING INSTITUTIONAL SUCCESS

**THE SINGLE MOST IMPORTANT COMPONENT** across all high-impact practices is clearly articulating and assessing student learning as identified in explicit outcomes. Assessment is centrally important for developing effective engagement activities toward increased student success and toward increasing institutional success.

For achievement on student learning outcomes, assessment is undergirded by the following assumptions:

- Students devote considerable time and effort to purposeful tasks.
- Students interact with faculty, staff, and peers for extended periods of time.
- Students are required to make daily decisions that deepen their investment in the activity and their commitment to an academic program or college.
- Students experience diversity through contact with people different from themselves.
- Students have increased involvement in class and campus activities.
- Students have opportunities for directed reflection.
- Students receive substantive feedback on performance.
- Students have assistance synthesizing what they are learning in one context and applying it to others (integrated learning).
- Students clarify values and better understand themselves.

In addition to the characteristics described above, high-impact practices intended to build engagement are intentional, systematic, synergistic, comprehensive, and accountable. These five additional characteristics are what turn high-impact practices intended to increase student success into practices that build institutional success. In the engagement paradigm, individual courses and programs are *components* of institution-wide strategies, not an end simply in and of themselves. Individual faculty members, administrators, and staff are part of communities of decision makers, and each individual is one of many voices involved in conversations about building synergistic connections across and beyond the campus. High-impact practices

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intended to increase student engagement are not a Band-Aid or a one-time fix; they represent a comprehensive understanding of the big picture of the entire institution and of the corporate responsibility that faculty, staff, and administrators share for success of the institution.

### **The Alumni Example as an Institutional Impact of Engagement**

**WHILE THE BENEFITS OF ENGAGEMENT** on different types of student success have been chronicled, there has been less work understanding the institutional impact. I had one opportunity to consider this impact in my previous position as director of administration in the student affairs division at Dartmouth College. There, my staff and I began to consider how we could better connect with our alumni regarding student affairs-related funding initiatives. We tracked students in our alumni database who were members of fraternities and sororities during their tenure as Dartmouth students. After a quick analysis, we determined that a higher proportion of alums from Greek organizations donated to the college compared to alumni who were not members of these organizations. They also gave more at the individual level than non-Greek students. Keeping in mind what I knew about engagement, I began wondering if students who had been involved in other ways on campus were larger contributors. We knew that students who participated in our outing club, our most active student organization, often step forward to fund initiatives related to the outing club. We just didn't have a way to track them in our alumni database to determine if they had similar donation patterns as Greek students. We worked with our information systems staff to begin tracking the various ways students were involved on campus to determine if my theory might be correct. Since we need to identify engaged students in our stu-

dent information system and then feed these data into our alumni database, it will take a few years until full analysis can be performed. However, I believe we have launched an interesting and important project that may tell us more about educationally purposeful engagement and its impact on institutional success as measured by alumni donations.

In my assessment class this past fall, our discussion about student learning outcomes shifted to one about engagement. I had mentioned my idea that engaged students lead to engaged alumni providing my Greek student giving example. One of the students in class worked in alumni affairs at New England College, where I was teaching, and she mentioned that she noticed something similar. Most of the alumni who were involved in their career network or as alumni mentors had been engaged students while on campus.

If engaged students become engaged alumni, there could be similar institutional benefits as the one I have experienced with Greek students who become engaged alumni. If we can identify the alumni who were engaged as students, colleges may be more effective in development initiatives. In addition to financial resources, colleges can build their human resources with engaged alumni for work across the institution. Engaged alumni are likely to be institutional champions as well. These are the people who wear their college apparel across the world, demonstrating their affinity for their alma mater. They are also ones who are the informal recruiters explaining the experiences they had as students in the hopes of encouraging others to attend their college or university. There certainly needs to be more research to explore this issue further.

We need to maximize these engaging opportunities on our campus and be as focused and intentional as possible. This way we will be able to help effect student success as well as institutional success. A cycle

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in which fostering student engagement leads to student success and then engaged alumni may help increase institutional success and would be a wonderfully synergistic enterprise. Examples of institutional success related to student engagement, I am confident, extend beyond the alumni story. An exciting opportunity lies ahead for telling those stories.

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