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

The 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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High-impact practices 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.
If we can identify the alumni who were engaged as students, colleges may be more effective in development initiatives.

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.

Notes


