

What Student Engagement Data Tell Us about College Readiness

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Good things go together. Students who talk about substantive matters with faculty and peers, are challenged to perform at high levels, and receive frequent feedback on their performance typically get better grades, are more satisfied with college, and are more likely to persist. While these and other educationally purposeful activities are positively linked to desired outcomes for *all types of students*, historically underserved students and those who are less well prepared *tend to benefit even more* (Cruce et al. 2006; Kuh et al. 2006). But for many reasons, large numbers of students do not devote enough effort to these and other important activities, though they are capable of doing so. As a result, many leave college and never return to try again. To increase the odds that students will survive and thrive in college, we need to know more about the precollege experiences and dispositions of students who are less likely to engage and induce those students to participate in demonstrably effective programs and practices.

This paper summarizes selected findings about student preparation and motivation to succeed in college, drawing on student engagement surveys and recent studies conducted by the Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research. The best known and largest of these projects is the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), which has been used by about 1,100 different four-year colleges and universities in the U.S. and Canada. I also briefly discuss why potentially “high-impact practices” promise to promote student engagement and help students attain the learning and personal development outcomes essential for the twenty-first century (AAC&U 2007).

How Ready Are Students for College?

The hard truth is that success in college is strongly related to precollege academic preparation and achievement as well as other factors such as family income and parents' education (Kuh et al. forthcoming). Students who do not attain grade-level proficiencies in math and reading by the eighth grade are much less likely to be college-ready at the end of high school. And if students do not do well in English and advanced mathematics classes (such as algebra II, precalculus, trigonometry, and calculus), interventions later usually have only modest effects on their chances to complete a baccalaureate degree. Along with college-level academic skills, high school students must also develop study habits and other behavioral patterns associated

High School Survey of Student Engagement (HSSSE):
www.indiana.edu/~ceep/hssse

College Student Expectations Questionnaire (CSXQ):
www.indiana.edu/~cseq/csxq_generalinfo.htm

College Student Experiences Questionnaire (CSEQ):
www.indiana.edu/~cseq

Beginning College Survey of Student Engagement (BCSSE):
www.bcsse.iub.edu

National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE):
www.nsse.iub.edu

Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE):
www.ccsse.org

Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (FSSE):
www.nsse.iub.edu/fsse

with postsecondary success. Once students start college, engaging in effective education practices can increase their chances for success.

The Past is Prologue: High School Experiences

Like NSSE, the High School Survey of Student Engagement (HSSSE) collects data about the extent to which high school students engage in a range of productive learning activities. Results so far point to a sobering conclusion. Although the vast majority of high school seniors (more than 90 percent) say they intend to go on to postsecondary education, many do not engage in the kinds of educational activities that will prepare them to do well in college (McCarthy and Kuh 2006). For example, almost half (47 percent) study only three or fewer hours per week, well below the thirteen- to fourteen-hour-per-week average of first-year students at four-year colleges and universities. Of two-year college students with fewer than thirty credit hours completed (the rough equivalent of being classified as a first-year college student), 25 percent spend eleven hours or more preparing for class each week (CCSSE 2004).

Even so, two-thirds of high school students who study three or fewer hours per week reported receiving mostly A and B grades. Less than one-fifth (18 percent) of students in the college-prep track took a math course after their junior year of high school. Only seven of ten high school seniors wrote as many as three papers of five or more pages. Only about

half (53 percent) put a great deal of effort into their school work; about the same number (51 percent) said they were challenged to do their best work at school. Sadly, high school seniors are less likely to be academically challenged than their younger peers. No wonder less than half (47 percent) of high school students said their schoolwork makes them curious to learn about other things and only a third (35 percent) said they were excited about their classes.

Taken together, HSSSE findings suggest that many high school seniors are not prepared academically for college-level work and have not developed the habits of the mind and heart that will stand them in good stead to successfully grapple with more challenging intellectual tasks. The senior year in particular seems to be a wasteland: the overall engagement of high school seniors is much lower than that of any previous year. In fact, student engagement declines in a linear fashion between the first and the last year of high school.

What Students Expect and Do During the First College Year

The Beginning College Survey of Student Engagement (BCSSE) is a companion survey to NSSE and asks entering first-year students about their academic and extracurricular involvements in high school as well as the importance that these students place on participating in educationally purposeful activities in the first year of college. Taken together, the results from these instruments provide a

portrait of who students are and what they expect to do in college as well as what they subsequently experience, information that can be used to design precollege orientation and socialization experiences with an eye toward enhancing student engagement and learning (Kuh 2005; Kuh et al. 2006; Kuh, Gonyea, and Williams 2005).

Institutional Examples

At **Winston-Salem State University**, new students and transfer students with fewer than thirty credit hours must enroll in one of three new-student adjustment courses. Sections designated for students interested in specific majors are taught by faculty members who serve as students' academic advisers and "mentors" for the entire first year. Student services professionals teach sections for undecided students.

In the freshman-year experience seminar at **California State University Monterey Bay**, new students design an individualized learning plan (ILP) that will guide their studies throughout the baccalaureate experience. At various points, such as the required junior-year major-specific proseminar, they update the ILP to respond to their changing educational and vocational goals.

University 1301 at the **University of Texas El Paso** is a course on the transition to college taught by an instructional team of a faculty member, peer leader, and librarian. Classes feature active learning including "open forums" and group projects. Instructors and peer leaders meet with each student twice during the fall semester to review the student's academic progress.

BCSSE and NSSE data show that first-year students expect to do more during the first year of college than they actually do (NSSE 2005). For example, about three-fifths expected to spend more than fifteen hours a week studying, but only two-fifths did so. Put another way, they study two to six hours *less* per week on average than they thought they would when starting college. Even so, nine of ten first-year students expected to earn grades of B or better while spending only about half the amount of time preparing for class that faculty say is needed to do well. Three of ten first-year students reported working just hard enough to get by. Motivation matters, as more than 75 percent of “A” students say they are highly motivated to succeed, compared with only half of the “C” students (see fig. 1).

The gap between expectations and behavior extends to life outside the classroom as well. The vast majority of entering students expected to participate in

cocurricular activities, yet almost one third (32 percent) spent no time in these activities during their first year. Between 40 percent and 50 percent of first-year students *never* used career planning, financial advising, or academic tutoring services. There are some areas where students do pretty much what they thought they would. One area is relaxing and socializing, which one quarter of students thought they would spend more than fifteen hours doing per week and 27 percent actually spend that much time doing. More than half predicted they would have little contact with their instructors outside the classroom; sadly, this became the case.

Institutions disappoint in other areas as well. More than four of every five students expected their institution to emphasize academics to a substantial degree and expected to attend campus events and interact with students from different backgrounds. But by the end of their first year,

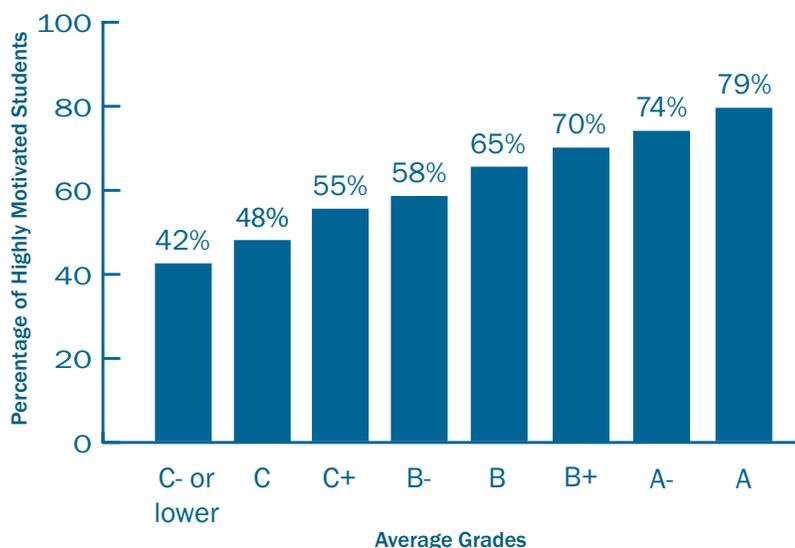
most students said that their institutions did not emphasize these areas as much as they expected. Nearly a third of students (32 percent) expected their school would emphasize interactions with peers from diverse backgrounds, but said that this was not the case. About three of every four students thought their school would provide substantial support to help them cope with non-academic responsibilities and enrich their social life, but more than half said that their school did not do so to the degree they expected.

Putting Students on Pathways to Success

The structure of the curriculum and the arrangement of resources can increase the odds that students engage in productive activities. Providing students frequent feedback in the first weeks and months about the quality of their work will also help them succeed in college. For example, results from experimental items added to the Web version of NSSE in 2005 show that students who participated in a first-year course specifically designed to enhance their academic skills or social development enjoyed significant advantages over peers who did not have such an experience. Specifically, they

- were more challenged academically;
- reported more active and collaborative learning activities;
- interacted more frequently with faculty;
- perceived the campus environment as being more supportive;
- gained more from their first year of college;

Figure 1. Percentage of students who are highly motivated—by average grades



- were more satisfied overall with the college experience.

Only about one-quarter of first-year students frequently (“very often” or “often”) attended an art exhibit, gallery, play, dance, or other theater performance. But about the same number *never* attended such an event during the current school year. Here again, what students perceive that an institution values and emphasizes makes a difference. For both first-year students and seniors, the frequency with which they went to fine or performing arts events was positively related to the

Institutional Examples

Miami University’s “Choice Matters” initiative encourages students to be more intentional about how they spend their time and to reflect on what they are learning from their experiences, inside and outside the classroom.

George Mason University monitors students’ performance to ensure they do not slip through the cracks. In the midterm progress report, faculty members (who receive reports for their advisees) and the academic advising office contact students with low grades.

Fayetteville State’s Early Alert System depends on an intricate network of faculty and mentors working in the first-year seminar course along with academic support units and University College and career center staff to identify and assist students in academic difficulty. All faculty teaching first-year students have contact information for students’ mentors and the University College advisers so they can alert them if students seem to be struggling.

emphasis students perceived the institution placed on attending campus events and activities.

Showing newcomers what they must do to succeed in college is necessary but not sufficient. Also important is an infrastructure of support, including early warning systems, redundant safety nets, reward systems, and ongoing assessment. The high-performing institutions described in *Student Success in College* (Kuh et al. 2005) purposefully align their resources and structures with their educational missions, curricular offerings, and student abilities and aspirations, continually tweaking or introducing new programs and services to meet changing student needs.

Pointing Students to Potentially High-Impact Practices

The Association of American Colleges and Universities’ Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP) campaign champions more consistent, widespread use of effective educational practices, featuring some potentially “high-impact practices” that make a claim on student time and energy in ways that channel student effort toward productive activities and deeper learning. One of these is the learning community, which NSSE defines as “some formal program where groups of students take two or more classes together.” Our studies show that students with a learning community experience were substantially more engaged across the board in other educationally effective activities compared with their counter-

parts who had not participated in such a program (Zhao and Kuh 2004). They interacted more with faculty and diverse peers, they studied more, and they engaged more frequently in higher-order mental activities such as synthesizing material and analyzing problems. They also reported gaining more from their college experience. Moreover, the differences favoring learning community students *persisted through the senior year*, suggesting that this experience—which most students have in their first college year—continued to positively affect students throughout their college years.

Participating in high-impact activities such as learning communities early in college can launch students on a trajectory of achievement that benefits them both in college and beyond. Providing students with regular feedback about their performance throughout their studies and providing opportunities to test what they are learning through problem solving with peers inside and outside the classroom, study abroad, internships, and capstone experiences help students develop habits of the mind and heart that promise to stand them in good stead for a lifetime of continuous learning. *Student Success in College* provides many examples of these and other effective educational practices.

Conclusion

First-year students typically study less, write less, and read less than they thought they would. Both students and institutions must share the responsibility for redressing this deplorable state of affairs. Our studies

show that when institutions emphasize certain activities, students are more likely to engage in them. For example, when faculty members emphasize educational practices such as writing, active and collaborative learning, or using diverse perspectives to understand issues, students are more likely to engage in these activities (Kuh, Nelson, and Umbach 2004). By identifying the gaps between entering students' expectations and their level of engagement in the first year of college, institutions can target their efforts to create educationally effective programs for new students (Miller et al. 2005; Upcraft et al. 2004). ■

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