Abstract

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EFFECTS OF ENGAGEMENT IN HIGH SCHOOL AND EXPECTATIONS FOR COLLEGE ENGAGEMENT ON REALIZED COLLEGE ENGAGEMENT

The positive relationships of college engagement with student persistence, graduation, and satisfaction have been generally accepted by researchers and practitioners for the past thirty years. Much emphasis has therefore been placed on the college’s role in fostering college engagement; however, despite considerable college programming intended to increase college engagement, little progress has been seen in improving national retention or graduation trends or the levels of college engagement. This stagnation begs the question of whether or not colleges are as responsible for fostering college engagement as is commonly believed. Are students themselves predisposed to a level of engagement before they reach college and are colleges simply selecting these students via their admissions processes? No prior study has adequately examined high school student engagement and their expectations for college engagement and their relationships with college engagement across a national sample. This study proposes a comprehensive model of engagement and tests the model to contribute a more complete understanding of the student-level factors that contribute to college engagement to the body of extant research.

To evaluate the relationships between college environmental characteristics, high school engagement and expected college engagement with realized engagement behaviors, a series of hierarchical linear models (HLM) models were developed using data from the 2007-08, 2008-09 and 2009-10 administrations of the Beginning College Survey of Student Engagement (BCSSE) and the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). In general, the variability in the NSSE
benchmarks was mostly explained by student characteristics rather than college characteristics. Moreover, the engagement behaviors in high school exhibited the highest and most consistent relationship with each of the benchmarks. Expected college engagement generally demonstrated the second highest levels. In addition to determining the relative effects of student and college characteristics on college engagement, the models also tested whether college characteristics had an indirect effect on college engagement by enhancing the effect a student characteristic may have on college engagement. However, no such relationships were found to be significant, thus indicating that college characteristics had only direct and slight relationships with college engagement when compared to student characteristics.

The findings of this study indicate a need to revisit the discussions surrounding college engagement. Rather than looking towards colleges as the primary source of college engagement, scholars and practitioners should rather look to those behaviors and expectations a student exhibited prior to enrolling in college. This paradigm shift is supported by the retention and engagement models previously proposed by Tinto, Bean and Kuh, but for lack of adequate statistical methods and survey instruments, the importance of prior engagement and expectations were understudied. Given college engagement’s relationships with other metrics of student success (e.g., retention, graduation rates), these findings may also have repercussions beyond first-year engagement.