

Examining the Effect of Student Engagement on Student Experience in Higher Education Institutions

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Abstract

Student engagement and student experience are two initiatives that higher education institutions usually pursue. However, the relationship between these two initiatives needs to be examined more adequately. Thus, this study assesses the effect of student engagement on the student experience. A survey research design was used to conduct the study. Data were collected from University in the US. The results show that collaborative learning, student-faculty interactions, and a supportive environment explain the variance in student experience. The implications are discussed at the end of the paper.

Keywords: student engagement, student experience, higher education, NSSE

1. Introduction

With the increasing commercialization and competition among higher education institutions, student experience has become a point of differentiation and a strategy for many universities and colleges to attract students (Buckley, 2021). The extant scholarship suggests that student engagement can potentially enhance student experience. However, there is limited empirical evidence to show that, in practice, student engagement initiatives improve student experience. Many higher education institutions have increasingly considered and treated students as customers who demand an excellent experience through student satisfaction surveys in search of value for their investments in higher education (Tsiligiris & Hill, 2021). Thus, these institutions implement different marketing initiatives and offer various student services and activities to continue attracting and retaining students and enhance their experience (Bultjens & Robinson, 2011).

The marketing scholarship has recognized that customer engagement is essential for developing stronger consumer-brand relationships and experience (Hollebeek, 2011) and ensuring retention. However, there needs to be more literature on the effect of student engagement on student experience, although universities and colleges implement programs to drive achievement. The assessment of the impact of student engagement has mainly focused on student achievement and retention (Farrell & Brunton, 2020). Thus, there is a need to examine the effect of student engagement on student experience. Addressing these research gaps is essential because it will help higher education institutions' management and student support centers implement programs that foster student engagement and experience.

Following the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), this study considers student engagement a multi-dimensional construct involving learning strategies, higher-order learning discussion with diverse others, collaborative learning, a supportive environment, and student-faculty interactions. The paper's overarching objective is to assess the effect of student engagement on student experience.

1.1 Literature Review

1.1.1 Student Engagement Conceptualization

There are two main perspectives on *student engagement* in the extant literature. One stream of scholarship conceptualizes students along the lines of Kahn's (1990) conceptualization of engagement, involving behavioral, cognitive, and emotional. The other stream of literature followed the Utrecht three-factor structure of vigor, dedication, and absorption (e.g., Snijders et al., 2020). However, the earlier conceptualization is popular and has been used by many researchers, including The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), to study student

engagement in higher education.

Behavioral engagement refers to students' involvement in social and academic activities, which leads to positive academic outcomes. Emotional engagement concerns the relationships and reactions to teachers, peers, and staff that will enhance the love for learning, including emotions such as humor. Cognitive engagement concerns concepts and deep learning (Mazuin et al., 2020). Chickering and Gamson (1987) proposed seven principles for higher education institutions to drive student engagement. The tenets include (1) improving the contact between students and faculty, (2) promoting collaborative work among students, (3) supporting students to adopt active learning strategies, (4) offering timely feedback on students' academic development, (5) ensuring students to spend adequate time on academic work, (6) creating high academic standards and (7) addressing diverse learner needs. Similarly, the US National Survey of Student Engagement (2021) defined *student engagement* as a five-dimensional construct involving a level of academic challenge, active and collaborative learning, student-faculty interaction, enriching educational experiences, and a supportive campus environment.

Snijders et al. (2020) defined *student engagement* in higher education as a positive, fulfilling, work- (study-) related state of mind characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption. Vigor is characterized by high energy and mental resilience while working, the willingness to invest effort in one's work, and persistence even in the face of difficulties. Dedication refers to being intensely involved in one's work and experiencing a sense of significance, enthusiasm, inspiration, pride, and challenge. Finally, absorption is characterized by being entirely concentrated and happily engrossed in one's work, whereby time passes quickly, and one has difficulties detaching oneself from work.

This study draws inspiration from Khan (1990) and NSSE (2021) and conceptualizes student engagement as consisting of behavioral, cognitive, and emotional dimensions. It involves learning strategies, higher-order discussions with diverse others, collaborative learning, a supportive environment, and student-faculty interactions.

1.1.2 Student Engagement Outcomes

Student engagement has both short- and long-term outcomes. Short-term outcomes include increased discipline-specific knowledge and higher-order thinking skills, increased motivation, enhanced sense of belonging and well-being, and improved relationships through peer-to-peer learning and collaboration (Bond & Bedenlier, 2019). It also improves classroom experience, academic performance, degree completion, and student loyalty (Snijders et al., 2020; Mazuin et al., 2020). In their study, Farrell and Brunton (2020) demonstrated that student engagement in an online environment influences positive learning experience, course completion, and satisfaction. Long-term outcomes include lifelong learning, enhanced personal development, and increased involvement in the wider educational community. It also develops skills and talent (Chiu, 2020; Bond & Bedenlier, 2019). Student engagement also impacts higher education institutions. It enhances institutional reputation and transformative learning (Bowden et al., 2021). Some studies have shown an incongruity between institutional support, the quality of interaction, and student satisfaction (Hwang & Wao, 2021). Teaching and learning strategies are also associated with student experience (Manokore et al., 2019). In contrast, the outcomes of student disengagement are non-completion, withdrawal, and unsatisfactory learning experiences (Farrell & Brunton, 2020).

Despite the numerous studies on student engagement and its outcomes, there still needs to be more in the literature. For instance, studies investigating the impact of student engagement on the overall student experience are limited. Thus, this paper addresses this gap. The overarching question of this research is, does student engagement impact the overall student experience?

1.1.3 Conceptual Framework

Drawing inspiration from Khan's (1990) concept of employee engagement and the extant literature (e.g., Chickering and Gamson, 1987), I propose a conceptual framework centered on [explain the core theme of your framework]. This framework incorporates critical elements of NSSE's (2021) conceptualization and Chickering and Gamson (1987) to investigate the complex interplay between engagement and student experience. Figure 1 presents a visual representation of the framework.

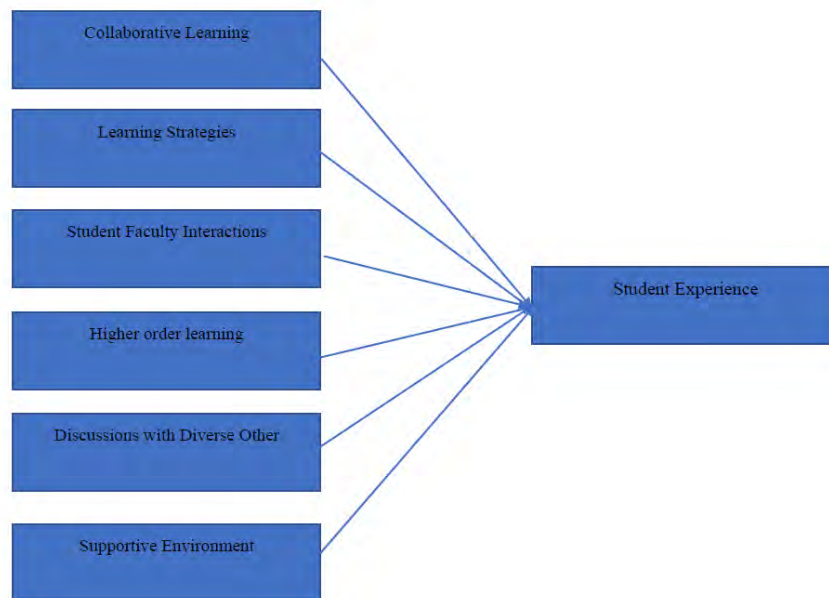


Figure 1. Conceptual model

2. Method

The study used NSSE data from students of a private higher education institution in the Midwest to address the research objectives. Six constructs were adopted to measure student engagement: learning strategies, higher-order learning discussion with diverse others, collaborative learning, a supportive environment, and student-faculty interactions. This decision is consistent with Kahn (1990), who defined engagement as a three-dimensional construct involving cognitive, emotional, and behavioral. Similarly, I followed the NSSE conceptualization to measure student experience. The reliability of the instrument was examined using Cronbach's alpha coefficient. All the variables met the 0.7 thresholds that Hair et al. (2010) recommended. Only questions with factor loadings of 0.5 were included in the final analysis. All the items measuring the constructs are in Table 2.

The data were collected from February to May 2022. We administered the questionnaire via email and the school's learning management system. Incentives were offered to the participants to improve the response rate. The total population of the study was 571, consisting of first - year and senior students. There were 291 respondents, representing a 51% response rate. It involves 75.9% women and 22% men. Most (91%) were Whites, 2.7% declined to indicate their race, and the rest were from another racial background. The detailed demographic features of the respondents are presented in Table 1. Multiple regression was used to address the research objectives.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics- Demographic Variables

| Demographic Variables | Categories | Frequency | Percentage |
|-------------------------|----------------------------------|-----------|------------|
| Gender | Man | 64 | 22.0 |
| | Woman | 221 | 75.9 |
| | Another gender identity | 3 | 1.0 |
| | Prefer not to respond | 3 | 1.0 |
| Race/Ethnicity | American Indian or Alaska Native | 1 | .3 |
| | Asian | 33 | 11.3 |
| | Black or African American | 32 | 11.0 |
| | Hispanic or Latina/o | 15 | 5.2 |
| | Middle Eastern or North African | 5 | 1.7 |
| | White | 181 | 62.2 |
| | Another race or ethnicity | 1 | .3 |
| | Multiracial | 16 | 5.5 |
| I prefer not to respond | 7 | 2.4 | |

Table 2. Reliability, Validity, and multicollinearity test

| Construct/Items | Factor Loading | Cronbach Alpha |
|--|----------------|----------------|
| Collaborative Learning | | 0.839 |
| Asked another student to help you understand the course material | .808 | |
| Explained course material to one or more students | .717 | |
| Prepared for exams by discussing or working through course material with other students | .785 | |
| Worked with other students on course projects or assignments | .655 | |
| Learning Style (reflective learning) | | 0.883 |
| Combined ideas from different courses when completing assignments | .633 | |
| Connected your learning to societal problems or issues | .797 | |
| Included diverse perspectives (political, religious, racial/ethnic, gender, etc.) in course discussions or assignments | .665 | |
| Examined the strengths and weaknesses of your own views on a topic or issue | .699 | |
| Tried to better understand someone else's views by imagining how an issue looks from their perspective | .719 | |
| Learned something that changed the way you understand an issue or concept | .648 | |
| Connected ideas from your courses to your prior experiences and knowledge | .694 | |
| Higher order learning | | 0.849 |
| Worked with a faculty member on activities other than coursework (committees, student groups,) | .579 | |
| Discussed course topics, ideas, or concepts with a faculty member outside of class | .523 | |
| Discussed your academic performance with a faculty member | .549 | |
| Discussions with Diverse Others | | 0.925 |
| Had discussions with people of a race or ethnicity other than your own | .845 | |
| Had discussions with people from an economic background other than your own | .888 | |
| Had discussions with people with religious beliefs other than your own | .864 | |
| Had discussions with people with political views other than your own | .854 | |
| Supportive Environment | | 0.918 |
| Institutional emphasis: Providing support to help students succeed academically | .695 | |
| Institutional emphasis: Using learning support services (tutoring services, writing center, etc.) | .670 | |
| Institutional emphasis: Encouraging contact among students from different backgrounds (social, racial/ethnic, religious, etc.) | .713 | |
| Institutional emphasis: Providing opportunities to be involved socially | .758 | |
| Institutional emphasis: Providing support for your overall well-being (recreation, health care, counseling, etc.) | .808 | |
| Institutional emphasis: Helping you manage your non-academic responsibilities (work, family) | .677 | |
| Institutional emphasis: Attending campus activities and events (performing arts, athletic events) | .750 | |
| Institutional emphasis: Attending events that address important social, economic, or political issues | .750 | |
| Student Faculty Interactions | | 0.822 |
| Worked with a faculty member on activities other than coursework (committees, student groups) | .579 | |
| Discussed course topics, ideas, or concepts with a faculty member outside of class | .523 | |
| Discussed your academic performance with a faculty member | .549 | |

3. Results

3.1 Analysis and Results

The findings demonstrate a significant relationship between student engagement and student experience ($F(7,283) = 19.997, p=0.000$). The R-square value .331 shows that 33% of the variance in student experience is explained by student engagement (see Tables 3 and 4). Further analysis was conducted to examine the effect of the student engagement dimensions on student experience. The results shown in Table 5 indicate that there is a significant relationship between collaborative learning and student engagement ($\beta = .245, t = 2.486, p = .013$), student-faculty interactions and student engagement ($\beta = .134, t = 2.347, p = .020$), and supportive environment and student engagement ($\beta = .440, t = 7.943, p = .000$). However, the relationship between learning strategies and student engagement ($\beta = -.009, t = -.134, p = .894$), higher-order learning and student engagement ($\beta = .051, t = .846, p = .398$), and discussion with diverse other and student engagement ($\beta = -.011, t = -.208, p = .835$) were not statistically significant. Thus, only collaborative learning, student-faculty interactions, and a supportive environment explain the variance in student experience.

Table 3. Model summary

| Model | R | R Square | Adjusted R Square | Std. Error of the Estimate |
|-------|-------------------|----------|-------------------|----------------------------|
| 1 | .575 ^a | .331 | .314 | .621 |

Table 4. ANOVA

| Model | Sum of Squares | df | Mean Square | F | Sig. |
|--------------|----------------|-----|-------------|--------|-------------------|
| 1 Regression | 53.973 | 7 | 7.710 | 19.997 | .000 ^b |
| Residual | 109.119 | 283 | .386 | | |
| Total | 163.093 | 290 | | | |

3.2 Discussion, Conclusions, and Implications

This paper was inspired by the need for deeper insights into student engagement's nexus and overall experience. Most previous studies had assessed various outcomes of student engagement, yet a few had examined the overall student experience as an outcome of student engagement initiatives. The results of this study show that some student engagement initiatives significantly impact students' overall experience. Specifically, the findings indicate that collaborative learning, student-faculty interactions, and a supportive environment explain the variance in student experience. The results mean that cognitive and emotional dimensions of student engagement are essential in ensuring students' overall experience in higher education. It indicates that when students discuss course materials, work collaboratively on a project, and share ideas, it enhances their experiences in the University. These results align with Farrell and Brunton (2020), which indicate that online student disengagement leads to unsatisfactory learning experiences. It also parallels Hwang and Wao (2021), who found a link between student engagement and satisfaction. Surprisingly, the study found that learning strategies, discussion with diverse others, and higher-order learning do not significantly impact students' overall experience. These findings contradict Manokore, Mah, and Ali (2019), which suggests that student engagement is associated with the student experience.

This research significantly adds to the body of evidence on student engagement and how it affects the overall educational experience in multiple ways. While earlier research examined the results of student engagement programs, this study closes a gap by explicitly analyzing the entire student experience as a crucial result. This change offers critical new perspectives on the overall effects of engagement initiatives. The study identifies three essential engagement practices—collaborative learning, student-faculty interactions, and a supportive environment—that significantly impact the student experience. Institutions can deliberately target these areas to achieve better results using this knowledge. The results underscore the significance of cognitive elements, such as cooperative learning and higher-order thinking, and emotional aspects, such as a supportive atmosphere and varied interactions, in cultivating a favorable learning atmosphere for students. This emphasizes the need for diverse engagement tactics.

Based on the results, a supportive environment is the most significant predictor of the student experience, followed by collaborative learning and student-faculty interactions.

These results mean that higher education institutions must encourage students to participate in social events, student groups, and societies. They must also provide innovative academic support programs, encourage diverse interactions, and ensure the health and wellness of students. Creating a collaborative learning environment will encourage students to work together and seek support from each other. Finally, higher education institutions must encourage their faculties to be more open to students. This will help students to discuss out-of-classroom issues, such as their career goals, with them.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Informed consent

Obtained.

Ethics approval

The Publication Ethics Committee of the Canadian Center of Science and Education.

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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