

Understanding the Impacts of Involvement

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Every semester, every year new programs and ideas are implemented at colleges and universities across the nation in efforts to "get students involved" and "get them connected to campus;" however the challenge that several of these universities face is answering the question: Are the programs and services that we are providing by getting students involved having a positive impact on the student's development. A few universities have begun to try to tackle this question, including the University of Wisconsin - Madison; however, research and surveys have tended to be a one time occurrence, merely exploring the current state of the student. To successfully measure the development and benefit these involvement opportunities provide, a more in-depth and long term study must be implemented. This paper will explore what it means to succeed in college, past methodologies for such research, and finally a new methodology for increasing the success of the study.

Definition of Terms

Throughout the course of this paper the term involvement will be heavily used. This term is simply defined as: taking an active role. Examples of said involvement could be anything from joining a student organization, to running for class president, to getting a job on campus. The term is loosely defined in efforts to best explore what it is that students are doing on campus and how it is effecting their overall personal development. The term active is used in the definition as meaning: a participant in the process or organization, not merely a recipient. This is not to limit those involved to the presidents of organizations, rather to include those members who take a piece of ownership in the organization and work towards progressing it

towards its overall betterment. It is important to note that this paper focuses on the involvement and development of undergraduate students.

Hypothesis

It is my hypothesis that the University of Wisconsin - Madison is currently not providing opportunities or breadth of opportunities for undergraduate students to successfully develop and get involved on campus. I arrive at this hypothesis through four years of undergraduate studies at the UW, with intense and frequent interactions with students and student leaders across campus. Through these interactions, students have expressed their observations as to the involvement opportunities provided. These feelings are not necessarily felt by the student body at large, but it is fair to say that certain populations of students are not receiving the opportunities that they wish to receive. While some of these groups have taken an active role in seeking the opportunities, often their efforts are lost in the red tape and bureaucracy of the University. These groups are generally classified by their type of involvement, for example: student government, leadership development, and diversity initiatives.

This paper is not intended to answer the question of how to solve the needs of these groups, rather identify where their needs exist and when they need them. Through the development of a research methodology, the University will be able to better learn about the needs of their students in the area of involvement.

What it Means to Succeed

Upcraft best defines what it means for a freshman student to succeed. He defines this as:

"We believe freshmen succeed when they make progress toward fulfilling their educational and personal goals: (1) developing academic and intellectual competence; (2) establishing and maintaining interpersonal relationships; (3) developing an identity; (4) deciding on a career and life-style; (5) maintaining health and wellness; and (6) developing an integrated philosophy of life."

- Upcraft, Lee and John Gardner. The Freshman Year Experience, pg. 2

To amend this definition to fit the goals of this research, it would be fair to apply this definition to not just a freshmen year experience, but to the overall undergraduate population. All students strive to fulfill these six areas that Upcraft defines. Upcraft says, "The key to freshmen success is involvement. (Astin, 1985)" (Upcraft, Gardner. The Freshman Year Experience, pg. 4) Again amending this to apply to all undergraduate years, involvement is the key to the development of students and their success in higher education.

Astin's Involvement Theory and I-E-O Model

Astin gives a framework for two significant things when regarding involvement. His involvement theory is one that explores when involvement occurs and the features of involvement. Secondly, his I-E-O model provides a strong methodology for studying experiences that occur.

Astin's involvement theory holds that "students learn by becoming involved...Student involvement refers to the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience." (Upcraft, Gardner. The Freshman Year Experience. Pg. 51) (See Appendix A for Astin's involvement postulates.) His theory illustrates a few main points.

Postulate one states Astin's definition of involvement, showing that involvement happens on several levels. It is through postulate two that a key element is provided, that involvement happens on a continuum and involvement is different for everyone. Involvement never ceases in a college experience, from the application process to the university through commencement, a student is exposed to an abundant amount of objects that impact their development and growth, as well as the decisions they make. Postulate three is fairly self-explanatory, in that involvement can be measured on both quantitatively and qualitatively. Involvement not just can be measured on these scales, but needs to be measured on both of these scales. Through the quantitative, research will be able to show when students are getting involved, the degree to their involvement, etc. It is through the qualitative that research will be able to show the true development of the student, their growth in their college career, as well as the lessons they have learned through their involvement. This qualitative data will be directly impacted through the degree to their involvement in the object, which is explained in postulate four. Astin's fifth postulate brings his theory to a close, stating that the duties lay within the policies and procedures to allow for students to grow and develop through their involvement. This theory of involvement is best researched through Astin's I-E-O methodology.

Astin has developed and refined a method for studying student development in college. His input, environment, and outcome method (I-E-O) is what he has used to perform his 1980 and 1985 studies. I-E-O is broken down as:

"*Inputs* refer to the characteristics of the student at the time of initial entry to the institution; *environment* refers to the various programs, policies, faculty, peers, and educational experiences to which the student is exposed; and *outcomes* refers

to the student's characteristics *after* exposure to the environment."

- Astin, Alexander. What Matters in College? Pg.7

By using this model, students, faculty, and policy makers are able to better understand what they are achieving, how they are achieving it, and the expectations are being achieved. This model can be used in several different ways.

I argue that the I-E-O model could be implemented in studying the effects of a specific program put on by the institution, for example, a residence hall event. Prior to the event the study would look at where the group is coming from. Are the students attending from a large hall or a small hall, what are the dynamics of the building, the location of the building? Who are the students attending, first years, seniors, business majors? The environment for this program will be where it is occurring and the atmosphere surrounding it. What's the topic, where's the program located, what time of day is the event? Finally, the outcomes should be measured directly following the event and a follow-up at a later time. These immediate outcomes may be a new understanding for a topic or the meeting of new friends. Prolonged outcomes may be a better understanding of how to live one's life or the development of a significant relationship.

These two major developments of Astin's have a great impact on the study of involvement. It's through his involvement theory and his I-E-O model that involvement studies can be better formed and structured, to allow for the greatest use and analysis of data.

Methodology Proposal

With the aforementioned information in hand, the following methodology is proposed for a study at the University of Wisconsin -

Madison. This methodology will explore three fields: the student's previous year to enrollment, the college career, and the student's ten years following commencement. The University of Wisconsin - Madison's undergraduate population is approximately 28,000. The proposed study will target 2,000 students, approximately one-third the freshmen class.

Participant Selection

The target group of students will be selected via a random selection process through the admission process of students. If a student turns down the desire to participate in the study a replacement participated will be contacted. Once the participants are found, they will be contact regarding the requirements of the study.

Previous Year to Enrollment

During the summer period, prior to arriving on campus, students will be surveyed as to their experiences in high school, college preparatory school, and/or pre-college experiences. This process will be a written intense survey, exploring the background of the student, his/her interests, and most importantly, their involvement in high school. This study will be the background information that will be compared to the data received through the years of college.

College Years

During the student's enrollment at the University of Wisconsin - Madison, the student will be asked to participate in several instances of data gathering. At the conclusion of each semester, fall, spring, and summer, the student will complete a written survey. This survey will explore which venues the student has become involved in as well as the current lifestyle of the student, if it may have changed.

Information such as where they are living, what they're current major is, etc will be regularly questioned as to track the changes in the student's college life. The survey will also include several open-ended questions, allowing the student to explore any venues they wish with the information they provide. The survey will also heavily look at the types of things the student has chosen or not chosen to get involved with.

Information will be gathered across campus as to the academics of the participants. This information will include: GPA, declared major, and other information deemed of importance.

During the course of each year, the participant will be asked to participate in a focus group. The focus groups will be randomly assigned each occurrence. These groups will focus on a high level of the qualitative data that the research wishes to provide. The focus groups will occur at varying times throughout the course of the year.

Finally, at the conclusion of each academic year, which may vary from student to student, the participants will be asked to write a paper, reflecting on the past year. Students may choose to write on a class experience, involvement in an organization, or any other experience they wish to expand on.

Ten Years Following Commencement

Following the participant's commencement, the student will ask follow-up information every two years. The information asked will again explore their lifestyle and how college has shaped their lives. Participants will also be asked to submit a written reflection on what they have learned and opportunities they have appreciated having while attending the University of Wisconsin - Madison. Participants will also be given the opportunity to make suggestions as to what the

university could have better done to prepare them for their years following graduation.

Use of Data

Each participant will be given an identification number, so as to keep their personal information confidential. Throughout the course of the study the data will be analyzed to better increase the involvement of students at the University. To best keep the data live, the study would be best implemented every third year, so as to always have feedback on the changes that have been implemented and whether they have been beneficial towards the success of the student.

Methodology Conclusion

This methodology is adaptable to any university or college across the nation. The largest concern that comes to mind is how to get student's continued participation in the study. To address this concern, the best way is to be able to reward the student in some manor, be it financially or a special recognition. With such a large sample, there is room for students who transfer or drop out to be accounted for, so this is not a large concern.

The data will only be beneficial if it used is and analyzed continuously. If the data is not used, the information becomes outdated and of little use rather quickly, mere years after taken.

Conclusion

Student involvement will never cease and nor will the need for information about this involvement. Astin is defiantly on the right track with his involvement theory and I-E-O method of research. This

method has been adopted to fit a larger picture and the needs of the University of Wisconsin - Madison. Involvement opportunities vary from location to location on campus, with varying topics and target audiences. Through these involvement opportunities, students have the ability to grow and develop themselves and their future lives. The development of the methodology provided is geared towards better understanding how the University is developing their students, through the student's involvement on campus, and most importantly, finding out what opportunities are successful and which are not successful towards the success of the University's students.

Appendix A - Astin's Involvement Theory

1. Involvement refers to the investment of physical and psychological energy in various "objects." The objects may be highly generalized (the student experience) or highly specific (preparing for a chemistry examination).
2. Regardless of its object, involvement occurs along a continuum. Different students manifest different degrees of involvement in a given object, and the same student manifests different degrees of involvement in different objects at different times.
3. Involvement has both quantitative and qualitative features. The extent of a student's involvement in, say, academic work can be measured quantitatively (how many hours the student spends studying) and qualitatively (does the student review and comprehend reading assignments, or does the student simply stare at the textbook and daydream?).
4. The amount of student learning and personal development associated with any educational program is directly proportional to the quality and quantity of student involvement in that program.
5. The effectiveness of any educational policy or practice is directly related to the capacity of that policy or practice to increase student involvement.

- Upcraft, Lee and John Gardner, The Freshman Year Experience.
Pgs. 51-52

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