

Chapter 1

Making Engagement Equitable for Students in U.S. Higher Education

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As American higher education continues to become increasingly diverse, so too will the needs of and challenges faced by our students. It is possible that creating engaging campus environments was easy when the overwhelming majority of students was male, heterosexual, Christian, and economically affluent. That is, at some point in history, responding to the needs of students in the same ways likely produced similar results. Perhaps staff in the student activities office, for example, had it easier when one set of programs was appealing to all students. Or maybe professors were able to plan more efficiently when there were fewer cultural perspectives to consider in readings, curricular development, and class discussions.

A dependency on sameness is no longer appropriate, as contemporary cohorts of students at colleges and universities are different; the ways they experience and respond to their campuses vary. Thus, faculty and student affairs educators must be strategic and intentional about fostering conditions that compel students to make the most of college, both inside and outside the classroom. In their 1991 book, *Involving Colleges: Successful Approaches to Fostering Student Learning and Development Outside the Classroom*, George D. Kuh and colleagues concluded:

Involving Colleges are committed to pluralism in all its forms, and they support the establishment and coexistence of subcommunities that permit students to identify with and receive support from people like themselves, so they can feel comfortable in becoming involved in the larger campus community. (p. 369)

This declaration and subsequent related perspectives guided the conceptualization and writing of the first edition of our book and is the same motivation from which we draw for the second edition. Although we differentiate involvement from engagement later in this chapter, transforming today's campuses into *Involving Colleges* for all students is very much the vision with which this work was undertaken.

In this volume, we amplify the specific challenges faced by diverse populations on college campuses and offer guidance for accepting institutional responsibility for the

engagement of students. We trust that readers will be moved to respond with deliberation through conversations, collaborative planning, programs, services, curricular enhancements, and assessment. A cursory scan of the table of contents will confirm that this book is not exclusively about “minority students.” Instead, authors focus on a range of populations for whom the published research confirms that engagement, belongingness, and connectivity to the college experience are in various ways problematic. Emphasis is also placed on enhancing outcomes and development among different populations, such as women and men and trans* and veteran students.

The practical implications presented at the end of each chapter are in response to issues noted in the literature, informed by relevant theories, and based on the collective professional wisdom of those who have written. The authors bring to this book several years of full-time work experience in various capacities (faculty, student affairs educators, academic affairs administrators, etc.) at a wide range of two-year and four-year institutions of higher education. Indeed, they are experts in the field who have taken an intricate look at the various populations represented in this book and have devoted a large part of their careers to understanding the needs of these students. Notwithstanding, we neither claim to furnish all the answers or contend that this book contains prescriptive solutions for all engagement problems facing every student population. Instead, experienced educators and scholars have collaborated to produce a resource for the field of higher education and the student affairs profession that will hopefully ignite dialogue, agency, and strategic thinking and action on behalf of undergraduates who are known to typically miss out on the full range of benefits that educationally purposeful engagement affords.

The remainder of this chapter sets the stage for the population-specific chapters that follow. We begin by making clear what we mean by “student engagement” and synthesizing what decades of empirical research contend about the associated gains, educational benefits, and outcomes. Next, the importance of shifting the onus for engagement from students to educators and administrators is discussed as we advocate strategy, intentionality, and reflective action. The role of theory in this book and in engagement practice is then justified. The chapter concludes with a plea for seriousness about aligning espoused values for diversity with institutional actions—we urge an abandonment of empty buzzwords related to multiculturalism on college and university campuses.

Understanding the Nature and Importance of Engagement

Student engagement is simply characterized as participation in educationally effective practices, both inside and outside the classroom, which leads to a range of measurable outcomes. This operational definition is borrowed from Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, and Hayek (2007), who also note:

Student engagement represents two critical features. The first is the amount of time and effort students put into their studies and other educationally purposeful activities . . . The second component of student engagement is

how the institution deploys its resources and organizes the curriculum, other learning opportunities, and support services to induce students to participate in activities that lead to the experiences and desired outcomes such as persistence, satisfaction, learning, and graduation. (p. 44)

We are persuaded by a large volume of empirical evidence that confirms strategizing ways to increase the engagement of various student populations, especially those for whom engagement is known to be problematic, is a worthwhile endeavor. The gains and outcomes are too robust to leave to chance, and social justice is unlikely to ensue if some students come to enjoy the beneficial byproducts of engagement but others do not.

Engagement and Student Outcomes

“The impact of college is largely determined by individual effort and involvement in the academic, interpersonal, and extracurricular offerings on a campus” (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p. 602). Researchers have found that educationally purposeful engagement leads to the production of gains, benefits, and outcomes in the following domains: cognitive and intellectual skill development (Anaya, 1996; Baxter Magolda, 1992); college adjustment (Cabrera, Nora, Terenzini, Pascarella, & Hagedorn, 1999; Kuh, Palmer, & Kish, 2003); moral and ethical development (Evans, 1987; Rest 1993); practical competence and skills transferability (Kuh, 1993, 1995); the accrual of social capital (Harper, 2008); and psychosocial development, productive racial and gender identity formation, and positive images of self (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998; Harper & Quaye, 2007; Torres, Howard-Hamilton, & Cooper, 2003). In addition, Tross, Harper, Osher, and Kneidinger (2001) found that students who devote more time to academic preparation activities outside of class earn higher grade point averages. While all these benefits are important, the nexus between engagement and persistence has garnered the most attention.

Engagement and Persistence

As noted in the first edition of this book (and elsewhere), differences in first-to-second year persistence, as well as in four-year and six-year graduation rates, continually disadvantage many students of color, undergraduate men, lower-income students, first generation college goers, undergraduates who commute to their campuses, and a handful of other student populations. While the reasons for student persistence through degree attainment are multifaceted and not easily attributed to a narrow set of explanatory factors (Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004), we know one point for certain: Those who are actively engaged in educationally purposeful activities, both inside and outside the classroom, are more likely to persist through graduation. This assertion has been empirically proven and consistently documented by numerous higher education researchers (e.g., Astin, 1975, 1993; Bean, 1990, 2005; Berger & Milem, 1999; Braxton, Milem, & Sullivan, 2000; Bridges, Cambridge, Kuh, & Leegwater, 2005; Milem & Berger, 1997; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Peltier, Laden, & Matranga, 1999; Stage & Hossler, 2000; Tinto, 1993, 2000, 2005).

Vincent Tinto, the most frequently cited scholar on college student retention, contends that engagement (or “academic and social integration,” as he has called it) is positively related to persistence. In fact, his research shows that engagement is the single most significant predictor of persistence (Tinto, 2000). He notes that many students discontinue their undergraduate education because they feel disconnected from peers, professors, and administrators at the institution. “Leavers of this type express a sense of not having made any significant contacts or not feeling membership in the institution” (Tinto, 2000, p. 7). In his 1993 book, *Leaving College: The Causes and Cures of Student Attrition*, Tinto argues that high levels of integration into academic and social communities on campus lead to higher levels of institutional commitment, which in turn compels a student to persist.

Similarly, Bean (1990, 2005) proposes that students leave when they are marginally committed to their institutions. Institutional commitment is strengthened when undergraduates are actively engaged in educationally purposeful endeavors that connect them to the campus and in which they feel some sense of enduring obligation and responsibility (Bean, 2005; Swail, Redd, & Perna, 2003; Tinto, 1993). Those who hold leadership positions in student organizations, for example, assume responsibilities in their groups and know that others depend on them for service, guidance, and follow-through on important initiatives. Thus, they feel committed to their respective organizations and the institution at large, and are less likely than students who are not engaged to leave. The same could be applied to a student who feels like an important contributor to learning and discussions in her or his classes. While the relationships between engagement, student outcomes, and retention are powerful, it is important to acknowledge the conditions under which these are likely to occur.

Distinguishing Educationally Purposeful Engagement

Thirty years ago, Alexander W. Astin defined student involvement as “the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience” (1984, p. 297). Astin’s conceptualization of involvement refers to behaviors and what students actually do, instead of what they think, how they feel, and the meanings they make of their experiences. His theory of student involvement is principally concerned with how college students spend their time and how various institutional actors, processes, and opportunities facilitate development. “The extent to which students can achieve particular developmental goals is a direct function of the time and effort they devote to activities designed to produce these gains” (p. 301). This theory is among the most frequently cited in the higher education literature.

While conceptually similar, there is a key qualitative difference between involvement and engagement: it is entirely possible to be involved in something without being engaged. For example, a student who is present and on time for every weekly meeting of an organization but sits passively in the back of the room, never offers an opinion or volunteers for committees, interacts infrequently with the group’s advisor or fellow members outside of weekly meetings, and would not dare consider running for an office

could still legitimately claim that she is involved in the group. However, few would argue this student is actively engaged, as outcomes accrual is likely to be limited. The same could be said for the student who is involved in a study group for his psychology class, but contributes little and asks few questions when the group meets for study sessions. Action, purpose, and cross-institutional collaboration are requisites for engagement and deep learning (Kinzie & Kuh, 2004; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 2005; Kuh et al., 2007).

The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), an instrument through which data have now been collected from approximately four million undergraduates at more than 1,500 different four-year colleges and universities since 2000, is constructed around ten engagement indicators and a set of high-impact educational practices:

Academic Challenge—Including Higher-Order Learning, Reflective and Integrative Learning, Quantitative Reasoning, and Learning Strategies.

Learning with Peers—Including Collaborative Learning and Discussions with Diverse Others.

Experiences with Faculty—Including Student-Faculty Interaction and Effective Teaching Practices.

Campus Environment—Including Quality of Interactions and Supportive Environment.

High-Impact Practices—Special undergraduate opportunities such as Service-Learning, Study Abroad, Research with Faculty, and Internships that have substantial positive effects on student learning and retention.

Student engagement in the activities associated with each NSSE indicator is considered educationally purposeful, as it leads to deep levels of learning and the production of enduring and measurable gains and outcomes (Kuh et al., 2005). This focus on student learning and outcomes creates another distinction between involvement and engagement. We offer one additional defining characteristic: the dual responsibility for engagement. In the next section, we argue that students should not be chiefly responsible for engaging themselves (as it has been proven that many do not), but instead faculty and student affairs educators must foster the conditions that enable diverse populations of students to be engaged.

Shifting the Onus for Engagement

Put simply, institutions ought not expect students to engage themselves. Kuh (2001) suggests student engagement is a measure of institutional quality. That is, the more engaged its students are in educationally purposeful activities, the better the institution. Similarly, Pascarella (2001) maintains, “An excellent undergraduate education is most likely to occur at those colleges and universities that maximize good practices and enhance

students' academic and social engagement" (p. 22). Given this, we deem it essential for faculty and student affairs educators to view engaging diverse populations as "everyone's responsibility," including their own. And presidents, deans, and other senior administrators must hold themselves and everyone else on campus accountable for ensuring institutional quality in this regard. A clear signal of institutional deficiency is when there are few ramifications for those who either blatantly refuse or unintentionally neglect to enact the practices known to produce rich outcomes for students.

From Negligence to Intentionality

Quaye and Harper (2007) describe the ways in which faculty neglect to incorporate multicultural perspectives into their class discussions and assigned materials. The onus is often placed on students of color to find readings that appeal to their unique cultural interests and to bring up topics related to race in class discussions. There is little accountability for ensuring that professors are thoughtful and strategic about creating classroom experiences that enable students to learn about differences. Interactions with diverse peers inside and outside of class have been positively linked to benefits and outcomes in the following domains: self-concept (intellectual and social), cultural awareness and appreciation, racial understanding, leadership, engagement in citizenship activities, satisfaction with college, high post-baccalaureate degree aspirations, and readiness for participation in a diverse workforce (antonio et al., 2004; Chang, Astin, & Kim, 2004; Chang, Denson, Sáenz, & Misa, 2006; Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, & Gurin, 2002; Harper & antonio, 2008; Hu & Kuh, 2003; Pascarella, Edison, Nora, Hagedorn, & Terenzini, 1996; Villalpando, 2002). "Knowing that students and society could ultimately benefit from new approaches to cross-cultural learning, but failing to take the necessary steps to intentionally create enabling conditions [inside and] outside the classroom is downright irresponsible" (Harper & antonio, 2008, p. 12).

The negligence described here is partially explained by the "magical thinking" that often undergirds practices of student engagement:

The [magical thinking] rationale provides no guidance for campuses on assembling the appropriate means to create environments conducive to realization of the benefits of diversity or on employing the methods necessary to facilitate the educational process to achieve those benefits. Under this rationale, the benefits will accrue as if by magic. (Chang, Chang, & Ledesma, 2005, pp. 10–11)

Negligence is synonymous with magical thinking; simply providing services for students is not sufficient enough to enrich their educational experiences. Rather, we defend a position of intentionality where faculty and student affairs educators are conscious of every action they undertake and are able to consider the long-range implications of decisions.

Across various campuses, race relations among students are generally poor and campuses are becoming increasingly segregated (Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, & Allen, 1999). Underrepresented students often report there is infrequent interaction between

them and their peers in dominant groups, and that there is a lack of attention paid to improving the climate (Ancis, Sedlacek, & Mohr, 2000; Cabrera et al., 1999; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Hurtado, 1992). When campus climates are hostile and antagonistic toward certain students, disengagement, dropping out, and maladjustment are likely unintended outcomes.

As Chang et al. (2005) and Harper and Antonio (2008) note, an erroneous assumption is often made that students will naturally learn about their peers simply by coming into contact with those who share different views, experiences, and identities. For example, simply increasing the numbers of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans*, and questioning (LGBTQ) students on campus will not automatically create more opportunities for heterosexual students to interact with them. Rather, as authors of chapters throughout this book maintain, educators must facilitate structured opportunities for these dialogues to transpire. Meaningful strategies are necessary that enable institutions to realize the benefits of engaging diverse populations. These solutions must be grounded in students' actual experiences, reflective of their unique backgrounds and interests, and designed with both broad and specific implications in mind.

The insights presented in this book are consistent with Strange and Banning's (2001) design vision for postsecondary institutions. They call for campuses that are "intentionally designed to offer opportunities, incentives, and reinforcements for growth and development" (p. 201). Such a philosophy of engagement responds to the multifaceted and complex needs of diverse populations. When an institution provides reinforcements for students, it means educators have envisioned and enacted the types of learning opportunities that will contribute to student development and engagement. This, of course, requires knowing who students are, understanding their prior knowledge and experiences, the types of educational contexts from which they have come, and what they view as necessary for enabling engagement (Harper, 2007, 2011). Devoting attention to those students who are not as engaged in educationally purposeful activities is an important way to be deliberate in one's practices.

Understanding Before Acting

Creating optimal learning environments in which all students feel connected is difficult, but nonetheless important. Educators must have the requisite skills and expertise to analyze the campus environment and determine where gaps in engagement and achievement exist. More importantly, they must resist the urge to act without considering the effects of potential solutions and instead, spend time understanding the obstacles facing disengaged students. Baxter Magolda and King (2004) suggest educators should participate in self-reflection prior to attempting to develop methods to resolve the issues confronting students. This self-reflection enables the person to contemplate how the limitations and strengths she or he possesses either facilitate or impede student engagement.

Faculty who are interested in providing avenues for students of color to be engaged in predominantly White classroom contexts might decide to incorporate readings that reflect the scholarly contributions of writers of color. On the surface, this practice

seems logical and consistent with research that demonstrates the influence of culturally relevant literature on student learning (Ladson-Billings, 1995). However, what this professor might fail to consider is the reactions of White students to these readings. How might the faculty member deal with White students who believe the course is primarily focused on students of color and accuse the instructor of attempting to indoctrinate them with a politically liberal agenda? After thinking about this practice, the faculty member might still decide to proceed in the same manner, but the outcomes will be different as she or he has considered not only the needs of students of color, but also the reactions of and growth opportunities for White students in the course.

Repeatedly emphasized throughout this book is the importance of listening to students in order to understand how to enhance their educational experiences. Since September 11, 2001, several campus environments have become unsafe for and hostile toward Muslim and Arab students. Seeking to improve engagement among these students, institutional leaders might plan campus-wide programs that include cross-cultural dialogues, Arab and Muslim speakers, and panels comprised of religious minority students sharing their experiences on campus. As educators strive to determine why these hateful behaviors persist, they may gradually learn that religious minority students are not only experiencing prejudice from their peers, but also in their courses from professors. The decision to incorporate a wide array of programs aimed at students is often missing in trainings for faculty and student affairs educators on teaching about difference in all its forms. In the current example, if educators failed to ask Arab and Muslim students about their needs and developed interventions to improve their experiences based on assumptions about the issues students face, such efforts would be void of a complex understanding of the challenges confronting these students and would likely be, at best, marginally effective.

This example demonstrates the importance of analyzing problematic trends and outcomes from students' vantage points. One of the most effective ways to improve student engagement is to invite those who are the least engaged to share their knowledge and experiences (Harper, 2007, 2011). As the authors of *Learning Reconsidered* recommend: "All institutions should establish routine ways to hear students' voices, consult with them, explore their opinions, and document the nature and quality of their experience as learners" (ACPA & NASPA, 2004, p. 33). When educators speak with students from diverse backgrounds, they will begin to see patterns in their stories emerge and gain a more nuanced understanding of their needs. In addition, educators can observe the particularities in students' experiences and begin to develop customized services to improve student outcomes.

Barriers to achievement and engagement can result from making decisions without qualitative input from students (Harper, 2011, 2007). Strange and Banning (2001) discuss how a renovation project of a campus building should include insights from multiple people (including students) prior to the construction. Allowing future users of the facilities to comment on its accessibility and openness to multiple groups

enables students to feel included in the decision-making process. This sense of ownership can facilitate engagement for various campus members. Some chapters in this book explore the impact of space and campus design on student engagement. For instance, providing opportunities for students with disabilities and students of color to share their opinions about the physical design of a building as well as select potential artwork for the walls, confirms that educators are taking their needs into consideration prior to proceeding. This practice will facilitate the construction of buildings that align with students' needs and interests, thereby, leading to a campus environment that is emblematic of the varied experiences, backgrounds, and perspectives of students.

In an era in which student engagement is receiving increasing attention, providing undergraduates with numerous, sustained opportunities to actively participate in determining the appropriate methods for enriching their academic and social experiences in higher education cannot be overstated. Several scholars (e.g., Baxter Magolda & King, 2004; Harper, 2007, 2011; Harper & Antonio, 2008; Kuh et al., 2005, 2007; Strange & Banning, 2001) propose educational practices that are student-centered, well-planned, researched, and guided by student input and assessment data. As Freire (1970) notes, acting without reflecting on why people are oppressed can lead to further oppression. He advises that educators utilize praxis—combining reflection with action. Throughout the book, authors write in this manner and advocate inviting students into dialogues about improving their engagement.

Using Theory to Guide Practice

One of the primary premises of *Student Engagement in Higher Education* is that educators make informed decisions when they utilize relevant theories to guide practice. As such, theories related to identity development, racial/ethnic awareness, stereotypes, deconstructing Whiteness, universal design, and others are tied to the needs of the populations considered in each chapter that follows. “Theory is a framework through which interpretations and understandings are constructed. Theory is used to describe human behavior, to explain, to predict, and to generate new knowledge, [practices], and research” (McEwen, 2003, p. 166). In this book, authors use theories to frame the issues students face and to inform the strategies they propose. In essence, there is interplay between theory and practice, as theory is used to recommend tentative solutions to educational disparities, keeping in mind that those approaches should be continually assessed and revised given the learners and institutional context. Similarly, alternative theories are available as one evaluates the effectiveness of interventions intended to improve engagement.

The use of theoretical frameworks in each chapter is consistent with current student affairs expectations. In *Learning Reconsidered: A Campus-Wide Focus on the Student Experience*, student affairs educators and faculty members sought to redefine student learning in higher education and build a common knowledge base on the most pressing challenges confronting today's college students (ACPA & NASPA, 2004). A new definition

of learning that integrates elements of student development and academic learning was proposed. The authors maintain that learning focuses on holism and merging students' classroom knowledge with the co-curricular activities in which they participate. The authors of *Learning Reconsidered* conclude:

The bottom line is that student affairs preparation must be broad based, interdisciplinary, grounded in theory, and designed to prepare forward-thinking, confident, and competent educators who will see the big picture and work effectively with other institutional agents to ensure that colleges and universities become learning communities in which students develop the skills they need to enter the rapidly changing world in which we now live. (ACPA & NASPA, 2004, p. 32)

In this statement, readers see elements of theory and practice synergistically bound. For the various populations described in our book to become engaged, they must become the focus of educators across various institutions. Furthermore, those wishing to enrich students' educational experiences must not only devise imaginative ideas for responding to engagement disparities, as the authors in this book do, but also must be informed educators who utilize theories that have received empirical support from researchers—a complementary goal of this book.

For decades, there has existed a superficial separation between faculty and student affairs educators, as the former were thought to be responsible for students' classroom learning, while the latter group focused on students' involvement in co-curricular activities (ACPA, 1994). Even though student affairs educators have sought to challenge and transform this demarcation between students' academic and personal selves, there still continues to be an expectation that professors focus on theory and research, while student affairs educators devote their time toward practice (ACPA & NASPA, 2004; Harper & Antonio, 2008). Authors in *Student Engagement in Higher Education* reject this false dichotomy and show how educators in both areas are responsible for facilitating a holistic learning environment. The authors model this by using, for example, psychological, environmental, and student development theories to guide the interventions proposed at the end of each chapter. They share some ideas for how faculty and student affairs educators can build on each other's expertise to improve the educational experiences of students.

An example helps illustrate this point. Some educators endeavor to increase White students' interests and participation in race-related activities and discussions. Yet, there continues to be an overrepresentation of students from minority groups in campus programming aimed at facilitating an appreciation of differences (Saddlemire, 1996). What often happens is that students from dominant groups do not see the connection between these issues and their experiences (Broido, 2000; Jones, 2008). This book contains ideas for using theoretical perspectives pertaining to power and privilege to understand White students' unwillingness to collaborate with their peers of color to improve the campus climate. By understanding different theories, educators can take the necessary time to consider the students at their particular institutions and what research indicates about

them. In addition, those who teach in classrooms can work to understand why dominant group members often resist talking about issues of difference. The use of theories can provide a foundation for campus programming and classroom-based dialogues.

We recognize that educators are often busy and must react quickly to crises that occur on campus. Decisions can still be made promptly and effectively if one keeps current with theory and reflectively strives to understand the changing needs and demographics of today's college students. Linking theory with practice is not simple; it requires a willingness to rethink one's assumptions about classroom and out-of-class learning and embrace a holistic approach to education that places students' needs at the forefront. One of the central aims of the book is to offer a wealth of examples where theoretical insights converge with practical solutions.

Beyond Buzzwords: Getting Serious about Engaging Diverse Populations

Diversity, multiculturalism, pluralism, equity and equality, inclusiveness, and social justice are among the many buzzwords used to espouse supposed institutional values. Colleges and universities use these terms liberally in mission statements, on websites, and in recruitment materials. Consequently, various groups of students show up expecting to see evidence of what they have been sold. The most obvious contradiction to these espoused values is the carelessness with which engagement is treated. Students of color and White student participants in Harper and Hurtado's (2007) study expressed extreme disappointment with the institutional rhetoric concerning diversity and inclusiveness. The misalignment of espoused and enacted institutional values must be addressed if students across various groups are to equitably accrue the full range of benefits associated with educationally purposeful engagement—there must be a greater demonstration of institutional seriousness.

“At-risk students” is perhaps one of the most unfair terms used in American education, in P-12 and higher education alike. This suggests that some students are in jeopardy of not succeeding. Our view is that students are placed at risk for dropping out of college when educators are negligent in customizing engagement efforts that connect them to the campus. While some may enter with characteristics and backgrounds that suggest they need customized services and resources, we maintain that student affairs educators and faculty should be proactive in assessing those needs and creating the environmental conditions that would enable such students to thrive. They are placed at risk when engagement is treated the same and population-specific efforts are not enacted. Concerning the engagement of diverse populations of college students, our position is very much consistent with the title of Manning, Kinzie, and Schuh's (2006) book, *One Size Does Not Fit All*. In the chapters that follow, authors advocate moving beyond sameness to customize educational practices and maximize engagement and outcomes for all.

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