

What student affairs professionals need to know about student engagement.

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George D. Kuh

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

What Student Affairs Professionals Need to Know About Student Engagement

George D. Kuh (bio)

In a 1992 *Calvin and Hobbs* cartoon (Watterson), 6-year-old Calvin asks his teacher whether he is being adequately prepared for the challenges of the 21st century. He wants to know if he will have the skills and competencies that will allow him to succeed in a tough, global economy. In response, the teacher suggests he start working harder because what he will get out of school depends on how much effort he puts into it. Calvin ponders this advice for a moment and says, "Then forget it."

The exchange between Calvin and his teacher gets right to the point about what matters to student learning and personal development. Indeed, one of the few unequivocal conclusions from *How College Affects Students* (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005) is that the amount of time and energy students put forth—student engagement—is positively linked with the desired outcomes of undergraduate education. Unfortunately, Calvin's response is all too common, if not according to what students say, then by what they do or do not do.

In this paper, I summarize the role and contributions of the scholarship and institutional research about student engagement and its relevance for student development professionals and others committed to enhancing the quality of the undergraduate experience. The presentation is organized into four major sections. First, I briefly describe the evolution of the student engagement concept and explain its importance to student development. Then, I summarize findings from research studies about the relationships between student engagement and selected activities including participation in high-impact practices, employment, and some other experiences of relevance to the current generation of undergraduates. Next, I discuss some topics that warrant additional investigation to better understand how to further potential and utility of student engagement research and institutional policies and practices that the findings suggest. I close with some observations about the implications of student engagement research for student affairs professionals and others on campus committed to improving the quality of undergraduate education.

Meaning, Evolution, and Importance of Student Engagement

Student engagement represents the time and effort students devote to activities that are empirically linked to desired outcomes of college *and* what institutions do to induce students to participate in these activities (Kuh, 2001, 2003, 2009). The meaning and applications of this definition of student engagement have evolved over time to represent increasingly complex understandings of the relationships between desired outcomes of college and the amount of time and effort students invest in their studies and other educationally purposeful activities (Kuh, 2009; Wolf-Wendel, Ward, & Kinzie, 2009). For example, building on Tyler's "time on task" concept (Merwin, 1969), Pace [End Page 683] (1980, 1984) developed the College Student Experiences Questionnaire (CSEQ) to measure "quality of effort" to identify the activities that contributed to various dimensions of student learning and personal development. His research across three decades (1960 to 1990) showed that students gained more from their studies and other aspects of the college experience when they devoted more time and energy to certain tasks that required more effort than others—studying, interacting with their peers and teachers about substantive matters, applying their learning to concrete situations and tasks in different contexts, and so forth (Pace, 1984, 1990).

Astin (1984) further fleshed out and popularized the quality of effort concept with his "theory of involvement," which highlighted the psychological and behavioral dimensions of time on task and quality of effort. His landmark longitudinal studies about the impact of college on students empirically demonstrated the links between involvement and a range of attitudinal and developmental outcomes (Astin, 1977, 1993). Astin was a major contributor to the widely cited *Involvement in Learning* report (National Institute of Education, 1984) which underscored the importance of involvement to student achievement and such other valued outcomes as persistence and educational attainment (Astin, 1999).

In that same decade, after an invitational conference of scholars and educators held at the Wingspread Conference Center in Wisconsin, Chickering and Gamson (1987) distilled the discussions about the features of high-quality teaching and learning settings into seven good practices in undergraduate education: (a) student-faculty contact, (b) active learning, (c...

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