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Introduction to Student Involvement & Academic Outcomes

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Introduction

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In 2010, there were just over 18 million undergraduate students enrolled in colleges and universities across the United States (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). Of that total, 60.5% were White, 13.8% were African American/Black, 11.5% were Hispanic American/Latino/a, 6.3% were Asian/Pacific Islander, and less than 1% were Native American/Alaskan Native (the remaining percentage of students identifying as international; U.S. Department of Education, 2012). As recently as 2009, the six-year college graduation rates for African American, Hispanic American/Latino/a, and Native American students at four-year institutions were 39%, 49%, and 38%, respectively, which lagged behind the respective graduation rates of 61% and 69% for White and Asian/Pacific Islander students (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). In addition, higher education achievement gaps exist for first-generation college and/or low-income students. For example, in 2005, only 54% of low-income students went directly to college compared to an 81% rate for higher-income students (Engle & Tinto, 2008). First-generation, low-income college students are four times more likely to drop out of college than middle- to high-income, non-first-generation college students and the national six-year graduation rate for low-income students was 11% in 2005 compared to a 55% graduation rate for their more advantaged peers (Engle & Tinto, 2008).

DeAngelo, Franke, Hurtado, Pryor, and Tran (2011) found that first-generation students and members of underrepresented racial populations graduate from college at lower rates across institutional types compared to their White and

Asian/Pacific Islander counterparts. While Asian/Pacific Islanders as a monolithic group appear to be doing well academically, disaggregating this diverse population proves that many students are, in fact, underrepresented and struggling, just as other "recognized" underrepresented populations (Chang, 2011; Museus, 2011). Obtaining a college degree is often viewed as a critical component of upward social mobility; however, first-generation college students, students from underrepresented racial minority backgrounds, and students from lower- or working-class backgrounds are less likely to be eligible to choose a four-year college, enroll, attend, and persist to graduation regardless of their academic ability than their counterparts from higher-income families or those who are not the first in their families to attend or graduate from college (Astin, 1993; Astin & Oseguera, 2004; Cabrera, Burkhum, & La Nasa, 2005; Engle & O'Brien, 2007; McDonough, 1997; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005; Tinto, 2006; Walpole, 2007). For students from underrepresented minority, low-income, or first-generation college backgrounds, the effects of these disparities in educational attendance and attainment can yield many negative long-term outcomes.

Disparities in degree attainment rates between students from historically underrepresented backgrounds can perpetuate socioeconomic differences, causing greater "gaps between the 'haves' and 'have nots'" (Dickbert-Conlin & Rubenstein, 2007, p. 1) and denying students from lower-income families the wealth of opportunities provided to students from higher-income families (Mortenson, 2010). Concerns that colleges and universities are "reproducing social advantage instead of serving as an engine of mobility" (Leonhardt, 2004, p. A1) are renewing calls for scholarship to suggest ways to enhance higher education degree attainment rates among students from underrepresented backgrounds, including research related to the programmatic measures in which higher education institutions can invest to promote students' success. In addition, researchers have sought to better understand underrepresented students' experiences that may prohibit students from achieving their educational goals. For example, Engle and O'Brien (2007) note that low-income students are more likely to delay entry into postsecondary education, enter two-year institutions, work full-time, and stop in and out of college. Berkner, He, and Cataldi (2002) describe low-income students as more likely to attend less selective public institutions, which tend to have fewer economic resources, serve students with greater academic and financial needs, and have lower overall graduation rates. Low-income students are also more likely to earn a nontraditional high school credential (such as a GED), often do not enter college immediately following high school, and are less likely to attend college full time (King, 2005; U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2007). These factors place students from underrepresented backgrounds at greater disadvantages for college completion.

A goal of President Barack Obama's agenda is to have the United States become the most highly college-educated nation in the world by the year 2020

(Mitchell & Daniele, in press). Soon after the President announced this goal, educational foundations like the Lumina Foundation and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation joined President Obama's education initiative. Niemann and Maruyama (2005) suggest that racial and ethnic diversity in higher education is a matter of national need as demographics shift, and we suggest the same for first-generation college and low-income students. Ultimately, to reach President Obama's goal and improve the economic prosperity of the United States, postsecondary outcomes for diverse college student populations must improve.

In summary, even as access to higher education has widened considerably over the last century, diverse college students (i.e., first-generation, low-income, and racial minorities) face greater challenges regarding their access to college, choice of college, sense of belonging, and success in graduating from college (Choy, 2001; Fischer, 2007; Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999; Karabel & Astin, 1975; McDonough, 1997; Mauk & Jones, 2006; Mortenson, 2007; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Paulsen & St. John, 2002; Smith, 2009; Walpole, 2007). According to Rendón, Jalomo, and Nora (2011):

> While traditional theories of student retention and involvement have been useful in providing a foundation for the study of persistence, they need to be taken further, as much more work needs to be done to uncover race, class, and gender issues (among others) that impact retention for diverse students in diverse institutions. (p. 244)

Perhaps further documentation of ways to support diverse student populations could improve postsecondary outcomes. We propose that one area of emphasis might include documenting effective ways to involve underrepresented and diverse college students.

INVOLVEMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Several decades' worth of scholarship in higher education has affirmed the positive benefits of college students' involvement in their respective colleges and universities (Astin, 1993; Kuh et al., 2010; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005). For example, Tinto's (1993) paradigmatic retention theory identifies the importance of students' participation in formal extracurricular activities and informal peer group interactions in predicting students' social integration—a factor which, in turn, predicts students' institutional commitment. Pascarella and Terenzini's (1991, 2005) comprehensive review of this subject suggests that students' interactions with peers and faculty, fraternity and sorority affiliations, intercollegiate athletics involvement, community service participation, diversity experiences, work responsibilities, and on-campus residence status are positively associated with their learning (e.g., critical thinking and writing skills). Kuh and colleagues

(2010) highlighted institutions that documented effective engagement practices (or DEEP institutions), which includes practices such as study abroad, undergraduate research, and living-learning communities. Astin's (1993) comprehensive study of undergraduate college students found that several types of involvement were positively associated with students' grade point averages (GPAs) after the effects of input and environmental characteristics were controlled. Some forms of involvement included tutoring other students, number of hours per week spent studying, participating in internships or study abroad, and number of hours per week spent talking with faculty outside of class. Several scholars have challenged these foundational studies, as the research does not always fully explain the experiences of students from diverse or underrepresented experiences (Fischer, 2007; Guiffrida, 2006; Mayo, Murguia, & Padilla, 1995; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Thayer, 2000). This suggests further complexities underlying all-encompassing involvement strategies and the various associated academic outcomes for certain activities.

Within the growing literature knowledge base regarding the many benefits of student involvement in higher education, gaps still exist about the potential benefits of involvement for diverse college students' academic success in higher education. Researchers who have previously examined the benefits of diverse students' involvement in higher education have received relatively mixed results. For example, while broader theories suggest students' involvement on campus increases students' institutional commitment and social integration, the nature of the involvement, whether formal or informal, within social networks of peers from similar backgrounds, or among off-campus connections all have varying effects on diverse students' academic achievement (Fischer, 2007). As colleges and universities grow increasingly diverse, and the number of students from diverse backgrounds continues to climb, new scholarship is needed to investigate the relationships between "nontraditional" students' involvement in a variety of activities and subsequent academic outcomes. Studies about students' academic achievements are important, as they can yield new insights into specific involvement opportunities that could leverage diverse college students' persistence and graduation rates.

REFRAMING INVOLVEMENT

Astin's (1993) comprehensive study measured five broad categories of involvement: (1) academic involvement (e.g., attending classes, studying); (2) involvement with faculty (e.g., conducting research with faculty); (3) involvement with student peers (e.g., fraternity or sorority membership, intercollegiate athletics); (4) involvement in work (e.g., working full time or part time); and (5) other forms of involvement (e.g., exercising, participating in religious services). Astin broadly

suggests that the effect of college on students depends upon the length of exposure in addition to the intensity of exposure.

Applied to college student involvement, but with a bit of a twist, we propose that the length of time in which students are involved in an experience is an important factor in predicting the outcome, as is the quality of the involvement experience. These two separate factors are likely interrelated and difficult to discern from each other; for example, we hypothesize that the longer students are involved in an experience, the more opportunities there are for interpersonal relationships to develop, for deep reflection to occur, and for leadership and promotion opportunities to arise—all of which may carry great significance for students. More directly, we argue length and quality both matter, and might matter independently of each other for different populations. We also acknowledge the importance of examining a greater range of involvement activities, programs, and opportunities in which students may be involved in higher education, including leadership experiences, employment, connections to families and home communities, and highly enriching educational practices. Further, we believe it is important to examine involvement through an "academic outcomes–based" lens; ultimately, any activity a student is involved in has an effect on academic outcomes and, thus, these activities and involvements should be documented and understood to improve postsecondary outcomes, particularly for diverse student populations.

OUTCOMES AND ORGANIZATION OF THIS VOLUME

This volume furthers the literature base related to the academic achievement benefits of involvement for diverse college students. Specifically, this text aims to offer evidence regarding the academic benefits and drawbacks of involvement for diverse college students. Therefore, the text is organized into the following categories:

- Theoretical and Research Advancements
- High-impact Involvement
- Student Organization Involvement
- Institutional Involvement
- Employment
- Family and Friends

Our aim is to:

- Improve scholarly discourse surrounding involvement and engagement by explicitly linking involvement to academic achievement (i.e., GPA, graduation rates, persistence) through theory, research, and practice.

- Document research-based practices to help institutions and researchers gauge the effect of certain involvement and engagement practices within various institutional contexts.
- Highlight practices that may hinder academic achievement for diverse student groups.
- Offer successful practical strategies that can be easily leveraged within colleges and universities to enhance underrepresented students' academic success.

In bringing together the authors of this volume, we believe this collection will help improve the experiences of diverse students in U.S. higher education contexts, and help advance higher education as it becomes increasingly and complexly diverse.

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