Chapter 22

A Study of the Predictive Relationships between Faculty Engagement, Learner Satisfaction and Outcomes in Multiple Learning Delivery Modes

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ABSTRACT

The confluence of technology convergence, market forces, and student demand for greater access is reshaping higher education institutions. Indeed, the convergence of technological innovations in hardware, software, and telecommunications, combined with the ubiquity of learning management systems, is reconfiguring and strengthening traditional teaching and learning delivery modes (Amirault & Visser, 2009; Harasim, 2006; Laurillard, 2008). In the current context, one in which universities are forced to adapt, rethink, and even reinvent themselves, the traditional lines between distance education (DE) and face-to-face teaching and learning are becoming progressively blurred, particularly since the dramatic rise of online and blended or hybrid learning (Means, Toyama, Murphy, Bakia, & Jones, 2009; Parsad & Lewis, 2008). This structural transformation is progressively redefining the concept of faculty’s presence and their ability to interact and engage learners. The traditional model of teaching and learning (with its heavy reliance on teacher presence) is being augmented with various tools and technologies (Abdous & Yen, 2010). Additionally, student engagement and its corollary, interaction, have been closely linked to desirable learning outcomes, including academic achievement, critical thinking, and grades (Handelsman, Briggs, Sullivan, & Towler, 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Carini, Kuh, & Klein, 2006).

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FACULTY ENGAGEMENT AS THE PRECURSOR OF STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

Student engagement is a multidimensional phenomenon that stems from a complex combination of factors related to the institutional and instructional environment which surrounds the students (Porter, 2006; LaNasa, Cabrera, & Trangsrud 2009; Laird, Smallwood, Niskodé-Dossett, & Garver, 2009). According to Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, and Gonyea (2008), the concept of student engagement is structured around two key variables: (1) the energy which students invest in educationally purposeful activities, and (2) the effort which institutions devote to using effective educational practices. Porter (2006) argued that institutional variables such as selectivity (colleges with high quality students), student body size, and faculty-to-student ratio affected student engagement in predictable and substantively significant ways. Ryan (2005) suggested that instructional expenditures had a positive relationship with student engagement, while administrative expenditures had a negative relationship on student engagement.

Built around the well-known seven principles of good practices in undergraduate education drawn from Chickering and Gamson (1987), the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) framework is the most comprehensive and popular tool for considering student engagement. Using five institutional benchmarks, which include (1) level of academic challenge, (2) active and collaborative learning, (3) student interaction with faculty members, (4) enriching educational experiences, and (5) a supportive campus environment (Kuh et al., 2008), this tool provides “high-quality, actionable data that institutions can use to improve the undergraduate experience” (Kuh, 2009).

At the instructional level, it is widely believed that student engagement is an important predictor of learner outcomes (Carini et al., 2006; Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2008). More specifically, it is believed that interaction is both a prerequisite and a co-requisite of genuine and ongoing student engagement and empowerment (Hafeez-Baig, 2007).

Basing their work around the cognitive and affective systems of learners, Fredericks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004) differentiate between three types of student engagement: (1) behavioral engagement (which is structured around student participation and involvement, particularly in academic and social or extracurricular activities), (2) emotional engagement (which is related to student attitudes and is considered crucial for achieving positive academic outcomes), and (3) cognitive engagement (which is related to students’ efforts and willingness to exert the effort necessary to comprehend complex ideas and to master difficult skills). Finally, Sharan and Tan (2008) perceived engagement as not only a medium to establishing a personal connection with the subject matter but also as a medium to use in forging a personal connection with the faculty.

After examining two components of student engagement (i.e., active collaborative learning and faculty-learner interaction), Willekens and Gibson (2010) identified faculty-learner interaction as the most critical dimension in student success. Similarly, Handelsman et al. (2005) reported that student engagement explained 30% of the variance in the final examination grades in a population of undergrad students enrolled in a basic liberal arts mathematics class. Robinson and Hullinger (2008) measured the level of student engagement in online learning by using a modified version of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) survey. Their results revealed no difference between online and on-campus students in terms of the level of faculty-learner interaction.

In sum, it appears that student engagement overlaps with several institutional, instructional, and personal factors, such as institutional missions and resources to learners’ self-motivation, commitment, and investment in learning. However, there is a consensus that faculty will play a key role in facilitating student engagement.