

## A Friendly Guide to Student Engagement

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Student engagement is a pivotal aspect of modern education, and a factor in student success. As higher education scholars and practitioners, we may often hear the words “student engagement” in our day-to-day work. But what exactly is student engagement? NSSE defines engagement as the following:

“Student Engagement represents two critical features of collegiate quality—the amount of time and effort students put into their studies and other educationally purposeful activities, and how the institution deploys its resources and organizes the curriculum and other learning opportunities to get students to participate in activities that decades of research studies show are linked to student learning (NSSE, n.d.)

Engagement measures can serve as a crucial barometer for assessing the depth and quality of students’ involvement in their educational experiences, their effort and commitment to learning, and the social dimensions of engagement on their educational journey. The concept of student engagement has a wide historical footprint, but the term has evolved and been applied in various ways. This primer introduces (or re-introduces) the concept of student engagement to those interested in student success.

### Foundations of Student Engagement

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Student engagement derives from a long line of research on college students and how their experiences impact their learning and development. Some important results and conclusions include:

- The time that students spend on educational tasks influences their learning and persistence (Tyler, 1957; Merwin, 1969)
- The quality of the effort that students invest in their education positively influences their success, emphasizing student agency in their outcomes (Pace, 1980)
- Increased student involvement in academic, social, or extracurricular experiences positively impacts their college success (Astin, 1984)

- There is greater teaching and learning when there is plentiful: 1) student-faculty contact, 2) cooperation among students, 3) active learning, 4) prompt feedback, 5) emphasizing of time on task, 6) high expectations, and 7) respect of diverse talents and ways of learning (Chickering & Gamson, 1987)
- The more students integrate themselves in their college community, the greater their persistence and success in college (Tinto, 1993)

## Other Definitions of Student Engagement

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Several definitions and conceptualizations of student engagement exist in the literature. Below are more current definitions of student engagement crafted by higher education scholars.

- Kuh (2009) defines student engagement as 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” (p. 683).
- Axelson and Flick (2010) define engagement as “how involved or interested students appear to be in their learning and how connected they are to their classes, their institutions, and each other” (p. 38).
- Fletcher (2015) provides a definition that outlines engagement as “any sustained connection a learner has towards any aspect of learning, schools, or education” (para. 3)
- McCormick, et al., (2013) clarify that “student engagement refers to college students’ exposure to and participation in a constellation of effective educational practices at colleges and universities” (p. 47)

## Benefits of Engagement

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Research on student engagement has found that several practices are positively associated with student development. For instance, Pascarella et al. (2009) found that NSSE’s measures of good practice in the first year of college consistently predicted improvements in effective reasoning and problem-solving, well-being, inclination to lifelong learning, intercultural effectiveness, leadership, moral character, and integration of learning. Pike et al. (2007) found that engagement was significantly related to students’ self-reported gains in learning and development.

Researchers also found important relationships between engagement and desired college outcomes, such as cognitive development (Astin, 1993; Kuh, 1993, 1995; Pascarella et al., 2009; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), psychosocial development, self-esteem, locus of control (Bandura et al., 2000; Chickering & Reiser, 1993), moral and ethical development (Jones & Watt, 1999; Liddell & Davis, 1996), and persistence (Berger & Milem, 1999). Mayhew et al. (2016) reaffirmed the strong research foundation for student engagement and the role it plays in how college affects students.

Student engagement represents two critical features of collegiate quality — the amount of time and effort students put into their studies and other educationally purposeful activities, and how the institution deploys its resources and organizes the curriculum and other learning opportunities to get students to participate in activities linked to student learning.

Finally, student engagement is valuable for assessment. The concept is accessible to educators, and results are actionable. It also represents something the institution can do something about through the intentional design and delivery of programming, instruction, practice and policy.

## High-Impact Practices

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High Impact practices (HIPs) are activities and programs frequently offered by colleges and universities that significantly increase engagement, learning, and student persistence (NSSE, 2007). Among the activities are 1) undergraduate research, 2) service learning, 3) internships and experiential learning, 4) diversity and global learning (such as study abroad), 5) ePortfolios, 6) first-year seminars and experiences, 7) capstone courses and projects, 8) learning communities, 9) writing-intensive courses, 10) common intellectual experiences, and 11) collaborative assignments and projects (AAC&U, n.d.).

While HIPs have generally been found to be educationally beneficial, in some instances, researchers found their impact on learning and development to be marginal or insignificant (Culver & Bowman, 2020; Kilgo et al., 2015). Contemporary works emphasize moving beyond focusing on participation in HIPs alone toward increased attention to the HIPs quality and implementation fidelity (Zilvinskis et al., 2023).

## Critical Considerations of Student Engagement

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While engagement is an important and valuable concept for improving student experiences and campus environments, there are several issues worth noting. For instance, some scholars have cautioned about whether the assumptions and results of engagement research apply to populations beyond majority-identity students (Bensimon, 2007; Harper & Quaye, 2008; Museus, 2014; Patton et al., 2015). It is possible that students engage in ways not historically measured by the higher education research community. Therefore, attention to equity and cultural influences in student engagement experiences is crucial to creating effective educational practices and environments.

Further, given the important relationships between several educational practices and the benefits of engagement, it is important to consider who can access them and, in practice, who participates. For instance, low-income students may have difficulty in participating in internships or unpaid research, or first-generation students may not be aware of a first-year seminar offered on their campus, limiting the benefits of these practices. Scholars have also noted that students may experience engagement and related programs differently based on their identities, creating disparities in access and benefits, presenting the need for more culturally engaging and affirming environments and opportunities (Museus, 2014; Museus et al., 2019).

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## Conclusion

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Understanding the dimensions of student engagement and institutional responsibilities to foster engagement is vital to enhancing student experiences and promoting success. We invite you to reflect on the following questions about student engagement and discuss them with colleagues at your institution:

- What definition of engagement most resonates with your institution or area?
- Have you encountered students who appear particularly engaged? What have these students accomplished?
- Are there groups of students who appear more engaged than others? What does this say about how your organization supports engagement?
- What critiques do you have about engagement given your institution type and students?
- How could your institution better deploy resources and organize the curriculum and other learning opportunities to get students to participate in beneficial activities?
- How does your institution consider student engagement in strategic planning?

## Additional Resources

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National Survey For Student Engagement (NSSE). NSSE Conceptual Framework. About NSSE. <https://nsse.indiana.edu/nsse/about-nsse/conceptual-framework/index.html>

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Given the important relationships between high impact practices and the benefits of student engagement, it is important to consider who can access them and who participates.

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