

Fall 10-21-2011

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Recommended Citation

Billups, Felice D., "College Student Perceptions of Student Life Programs" (2011). *NERA Conference Proceedings 2011*. 13.
http://digitalcommons.uconn.edu/nera_2011/13

College Student Perceptions of Student Life Programs

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**Paper presented at the 42nd annual meeting of the Northeastern Educational
Research Association, October 19-21, 2011, Rocky Hill, CT.**

College Student Perceptions of Student Life Programs

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this sequential explanatory mixed methods study was to describe and explore undergraduate student satisfaction with student life programming at a small, specialized college in the Northeast. Phase I of the study employed a quantitative instrument to determine the satisfaction and extent of involvement with programming ($N = 240$); Phase I findings indicated that students were highly satisfied with student life programs in which they were most significantly involved. There were, however, gaps in their awareness and satisfaction with student life program opportunities and the nature of those opportunities. These variances in perceptions and satisfaction scores prompted further exploration in Phase II, which employed focus groups ($N = 4$) to further probe and clarify Phase I findings and to develop a holistic profile of student perspectives on programs designed to supplement their collegiate educational experience.

Theoretical Framework and Background

Theory of Involvement. Astin's (1984, 1993) research regarding the ways in which college impacts undergraduate students frames this study. His Theory of Involvement explains the dynamics of how students change or develop over time, relative to their collective experiences while in college; the elements serving as the basis for Astin's theory center around 1) inputs, 2) environment, and 3) outcomes.

Inputs. This dimension examines the constructs related to student demographics and their prior educational and personal backgrounds.

Environment. This dimension examines the constructs related to the experiences students immerse themselves in during college and the impact those experiences have on their development.

Outcomes. This dimension examines the constructs related to the resulting characteristics, knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, and values that emerge in the years after a student completes college (Astin, 1984).

Astin (1984, 1993) studied the specific factors strongly associated with a student's overall satisfaction with college, finding that the factors with the strongest positive effect on satisfaction included the number of hours spent per week in student-to-student

interactions, particularly while students are involved in clubs, social organizations, special events, intramural activities, and workshops or seminars (Astin, 1993, p. 279). This study will focus on the second core concept, looking at the environmental and social elements that affect student development and their inclination to be satisfied with college based on these complex interactions.

Hence, this study will analyze student perceptions of their satisfaction and involvement with student life programs, as reported via focus group research. Other researchers have sought similar associations between co-curricular engagement and student satisfaction with college (Kane, Williams, & Cappuccini-Ansfield, 2008; Quimet, Bunnage, Carini, Kuh, & Kennedy, 2004; Small, 2008; Smith, Szelest, & Downey, 2004; Wharton, Wang, & Whitworth, 2007; Wiers-Jensen, Stensaker, & Groggaard, 2002); however, much of the research that studies these associations focuses on quantitative measures rather than qualitative probing. This research study seeks to further identify student perceptions by highlighting their own stories and personal experiences to augment the quantitative findings in the literature.

Student involvement in college. While the current higher education lexicon emphasizes the use of the term ‘engagement’, the concept is closely intertwined with term ‘involvement’; indeed, the early research regarding student success and involvement in college began with researchers such as Tinto (1993), who examined the relationship between a student’s involvement with their institution and their likelihood to persist; Astin (1993, 1999), who studied the dynamics of how students develop in college based on the extent and nature of their involvement there; and Pascarella (1985), and Pascarella and Terenzini (2005), who studied the various factors associated with retention and student integration. More recently, Kuh (1991, 2001) adapted the concept of involvement to a focus on engagement, or a student’s effort and involvement in meaningful activities in and out of the classroom. The relationship between student involvement and/or engagement and persistence is summarized by Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, and Whitt: “...what students do during college counts more for what they learn and whether they will persist in college than who they are or even where they go to college” (2005, p. 8).

Involvement as the key to student success. Considerable research has been accomplished regarding the ways in which student involvement in curricular and co-curricular activities affect the strength of their affiliation with the institution, faculty, and other students (Astin, 1999; Brazzell & Reisser, 1999; Kennedy, Sheckley, & Kehrhahn, 2000; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1993; Thomas, 2000). The relationships that result affect positive socialization (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), and allow for personal and psychosocial development (Tinto, 1993).

Purposeful activity in co-curricular activities. Purposeful involvement in college can mean many things. Significant research has focused on academic involvement and its impact on active learning (as opposed to passive learning) (Barr & Tagg, 1995; Beeny, 2003; Chickering & Gamson, 1987); however, extensive research has also focused on the benefits of student involvement in extra- and co-curricular programs and activities (Baxter-Magolda, 1992; Huang & Chang, 2004; Kuh, 1991; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Tinto (1993) and Astin (1993, 1999) both emphasize that involvement with student clubs, social events and student-sponsored activities allow for deeper integration with and attachment to the college, hence facilitating affiliation and involvement.

Group interactions and perceptions of involvement. Student development theory, in particular, references the ways in which values and beliefs develop during a young adult's formation, looking closely at that period between 18 and 24 years of age (Chickering & Reiser, 1993). Most college students fall within that age range, and their tendency to mature through direct experience with various activities, relationships, and processes can be related to their experiences on their college campuses. As Wharton, Wang, and Whitworth (2007) point out, student affairs professionals strive to provide and assess a full complement of student life programs and activities that support a student's personal and social development. These programs range from student government, cultural, spiritual, and special interest groups, to community service opportunities and athletic team participation.

The current population of students in and entering college, known as the Millennials (Howe & Strauss, 2007), approach student life programs and group interactions in a unique way. Millennials are characterized as a generation of team-

oriented, socially connected, rule-followers who have close relationships with their parents and for whom family and personal relationships are very important (Elam, Stratton, & Gibson, 2007). These students view the group setting, and activities derived within a group, as a safe environment to connect with peers; they are used to group interactions because their entire educational and social experience has been rooted in classroom and team settings (Rickes, 2009). Involving the Millennials in college-sponsored student life programs is likely to affect their sense of connection.

To that end, one of the greatest challenges facing student affairs practitioners and educational researchers is to regularly assess the effectiveness and relevance of student life programs (Wharton, Wang, & Whitworth, 2007). Effective assessment practices produce information that helps to revise and create effective programming for students; a regular program of assessment provides administrators the opportunity to track trends and issues as they emerge, and to inform their practice and policies.

This study attempted to address this challenge by administering a survey questionnaire, followed by focus group interviews, to explore student perceptions of one campus's efforts to provide quality student life programming. The literature reveals that numerous quantitative studies have been conducted over the past 40 years (UCLA – HERI, NSSE, PACE), but relatively few studies have regularly sought student perceptions of these programs, using their own words and their own stories. The use of narratives and rich description provides a holistic profile of the student experience, and may explain the nuances of how students become, and remain, connected to their institutions.

Methodology

Design

This sequential explanatory mixed methods study involved the administration of a survey questionnaire ($N = 240$) during Phase I and employed focus group interviews with select survey participants ($N = 4$) during Phase II. The Phase I instrumentation consisted of 32 items, utilizing a mix of forced choice, value-laden agreement statements, and Likert-type scaled questions. Seven open-ended questions were also included to encourage respondents' editorial comments.

In Phase II, a series of student focus groups ($N = 4$) were conducted in order to further probe the findings resulting from Phase I. This second phase was intended to develop a detailed and richly descriptive holistic picture of student perceptions by building on prior themes, essence meanings, and stories. Findings from Phase I survey questionnaire results revealed 6 questionnaire items that generated mean scores of 3.0 or lower on a 5-point scale (overall satisfaction with student life programs, awareness of program options, opportunities to interact with other students); these scores implied ambivalence or uncertainty about the item's content, or implied a poor satisfaction rating by the student. Additionally, editorial comments provided by students within the survey instrument yielded extensive commentary on issues that students identified as problematic or unsatisfactory (physical facilities to house student life programs, campus communications). In all instances, further probing was deemed worthwhile, and focus group interviews were identified as an ideal way to explore these issues.

Krueger and Casey (2009) call focus groups “carefully planned ...discussions designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment” (p. 2). Focus groups are group interviews that capitalize on the synergy and interaction between participants to yield rich, descriptive details of participants' experiences and perceptions. Synergy in these group sessions can be defined as the activity whereby participants not only query each other but also explain themselves to each other; this activity helps to clarify participants' perspectives and beliefs about the topic under discussion (Krueger & Casey, 2009).

Participants

Phase I participants consisted of a random sample of currently enrolled undergraduate students at a small, specialized college in the Northeast. Phase II participants included a purposeful sample of students from the same population, who participated in the survey phase and who indicated a willingness to participate in follow-up focus group sessions. Groups were mixed, with students from different class years, majors, leadership roles, and residence halls; the optimal size for each focus group was 12 students; the average size of each of the four groups was 10 students, with one group realizing participation of only 7 students and another group realizing participation of 14.

These participants were purposefully chosen for their ‘information-rich’ capacities to provide detailed responses and thick description (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Instrumentation

Phase II of this study employed a moderator’s guide to facilitate the focus group discussions. The content and questioning route was initially developed after a review of Phase I findings (survey questionnaire) and a thematic analysis of the open-ended comments on that questionnaire. Using the format noted in Krueger and Casey (2009), the sessions began with icebreaker questions to encourage familiarity among participants. Introduction and transition questions followed, designed to introduce the topic questions in a non-threatening manner; key and critical content questions formed the substance of the discussions, focusing on the perceptions students offered regarding their experiences with the college’s student life programs. Students were asked to describe their typical participation levels and interests in student life programs, their preferences regarding program opportunities and locations for programs, their perceptions of communication strategies related to programming, their sense of value related to peer interactions and affiliations, and their overall sense of how student life programs relate to their overall satisfaction with college. The sessions concluded with questions intended to clarify ambiguities and allow for ‘debriefing’, as students shared personal stories (Morgan, 1997).

Following each focus group session, member checking was employed as the initial findings were shared with select participants. Participants were asked to correct errors, assess the intention of their words, and add meaning to the findings that may have been stimulated from reading the transcripts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Data Analysis

Focus group data was transcribed following each session using coding, content analysis and thematic clustering. Modifying Krueger and Casey’s (2009) Classic Approach for data analysis and Miles and Huberman’s (1994) coding strategy, the data analysis process proceeded as follows:

- 1) Coding. The coded data was transformed into themes and categories in order to present the findings, using participants’ words and expressions to illustrate their meaning essence (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The sequence of coding

followed the route outlined by Miles and Huberman (p. 57), as a way to organize the different levels of abstraction in the focus group data:

- a. Descriptive coding: Preliminary labeling of phrases or sentences that allow for the first level of categorization;
 - b. Interpretative coding: Taking the preliminary code labels, the researcher moves to consolidate and re-label data into more inferential or meaningful categories;
 - c. Pattern coding: The final assignment of codes, just prior to being moved to content categories, allows the researcher to assign specific meanings and inferences to codes.
- 2) Thematic clustering. Searching the content categories to see where themes emerge and are similar, making the creation of initial thematic clusters possible.
 - 3) Descriptive summaries. Label each initial theme cluster with a descriptive sentence or phrase that explains the theme in more detail. It is at this point that the researcher compares the theoretical framework with the findings to determine how to best integrate the themes with the elements of the framework.
 - 4) Integrating quotes and stories. Review the transcripts to link stories, expressions, phrases, and quotes with the theme categories; using this 'raw' data will support the themes and augment the reader's understanding of how to interpret the findings (Krueger & Casey, 2009, p. 122).

Discussion

The theoretical framework for this study is rooted in Astin's (1984) Theory of Involvement. Phase II findings are reported according to the inter-related elements known to affect a student's satisfaction and engagement with college. Results are presented in the participants' own words, capitalizing on the stories, details, and multiple realities that were expressed in interactive discussions.

Themes that emerged from the findings reflected the characteristics outlined in Astin's framework, breaking out into five main categories: 1) overall perceptions of co-

curricular programs, 2) peer-to-peer interactions, 3) types and quality of programs, 4) communications and awareness of programs, and 5) hours spent outside the classroom:

- **Overall Perceptions of Student Life Programs: “Making us feel like we belong...”**
 - Students indicated a high level of satisfaction with the activities and organizations sponsored by the Office of Student Life; their perceptions of the value of these programs were viewed as integral to their satisfaction with college, overall. Students expressed a series of sentiments on their feelings on the subject:
 - “There are times when we should all get together and have fun, learn from each other, get away from homework and the classroom!”
 - “We need more opportunities to interact with each other outside the classroom because socializing is such a big part of going to college...”
 - “Different types of events, particularly campus-wide events, stress the importance of being part of a community and making us feels like we belong somewhere!”
 - “All campus events and student organizations are the only part of campus life where people share specific parts of themselves that have more to do with who they are as individuals – that is what makes us special, and it makes it possible to see others in the same way!”

Kuh (1991) supports this concept that out-of-class experiences provide an important lens for how a student views their college experience, where the combination of academic, social and psychosocial development lead a student to feel connected and satisfied with college.

- **Peer-to-Peer Relationships: “You leave with more than you arrived with...”**
 - Students want to develop meaningful relationships with their peers, and find that a variety of events, organizations, and activities serve them well in this pursuit:
 - “Sometimes I feel like the only people I know here are the people in my major department... but there are 2000 other students out there and I should be able to meet them and get to know them... I want to know more people by the time I graduate than just the ones I live with or study with...”
 - “I want to see how others do things, what they think, where they come from, how they approach college – and I cannot do that if I don’t know how to find them, outside of my classes or dorm.”
 - “We should have a chance to interact with other students, not only in a social way, but also in academic ways; we are here to learn and grow and we should help each other with that process? Maybe departmental open houses or something like that would emphasize the intellectual activities that are so important to so many of us here!”

Holzweiss (2003) and Astin (1993) view the importance of peer relationships in college as the reason why students often become involved in extra- and co-curricular activities; their research confirms that the greater the involvement in out-of-class activities, the more likely students are to be satisfied and stay enrolled in school.

- **Types and Quality of Programs: “Events should be student-created and reflect who we are...”**
 - While students found that the majority of their interactions were based in their departments or residences, they felt that an increase in all-campus events, and broad-based programming would be an asset:

- “I really value the all-campus events that OSL sponsors each year –the Ball, the bus trips to NYC, the student picnic at the farm... these things force us to see the student body as a whole, to see the college from a different perspective”
 - “Other colleges seem to spend more money on big events and value them more, while we only do a few and don’t advertise them as much as I think we should – doing things as a student body is really important and takes advantage of developing school spirit or a sense that we are part of something important”
 - “Big bash events should occasionally be student-created, since we have some great ideas and talk to each other more than the faculty or staff talk to us ... or maybe it is that we listen to each other more carefully?”
- Additionally, students expressed an interest in different types of gathering places, to facilitate more casual interactions:
 - “We need informal gathering spaces on campus that allow us to just hang out, just be with each other without a formal program, just allow people to float in and out as their schedules allow – sometimes, being flexible like that, means that surprising things happen!”
 - “We need a better student center or at least one that is designed for our needs, and not what the administration thinks that students want --- we don’t just want a place for different types of food, we want a place that allows for different levels of gathering, talking, listening to music, different types of interactions...”

As noted in Hernandez, Hogan, Hathaway, and Lovell’s study (1999), “The impact of college is a result of the degree to which the student makes use of the people, leadership positions, facilities and opportunities made available by

the college.” (p. 195). The inter-dependence of these elements allows for the student to test and explore their ‘place’ in and around the campus community.

- **Communications and Awareness: “Speak to us where we are, find us where we live, talk to us so we will listen...”**
 - Most students indicated moderate to extensive awareness of the student life programs on campus, but felt that their awareness depended on serendipity or on close personal relationships with students who were already deeply involved in activities. Students felt strongly that alternative communication approaches needed to be explored:
 - “We need a better way to find out what is happening on campus... we spend so much time in the classroom and doing our work that we don’t always seek out information about activities, events, clubs, etc.; try to find us where we are, where we spend most of our time!”
 - “We all have smart phones and laptops... stop sending things to our mailboxes or putting posters on the walls in the mailroom – no one even looks!!”
 - “I’m glad you have started to use Facebook for just about every type of calendar announcement for student activities --- that is the only thing I look at regularly”
 - “There needs to be a better orientation at the beginning of the first year, and every year thereafter, to remind us of all that is going on and to update us on how we can find out about these things”

Communication between and among students and college personnel plays a vital role in the development of the student as an individual, a leader, a maturing young adult, and a contributing member of the campus. Beeny (2003) emphasizes the importance of communication skills by stressing that the more involved students are in campus activities, the more likely they are to develop facile communication and interpersonal skills.

- **Time Spent Outside the Classroom: “Our time spent together outside of our classes is the icing on this cake!”**
 - The majority of students indicated that most of their time was spent either in class or in preparing for class; these sentiments mirror most of the student research that has been conducted on college campuses in the past decade (NSSE, 2010); the emphasis, however, was on the value students placed on the time they spent outside the classroom, whether it was in pre-scheduled co-curricular activities or in spontaneous gatherings:
 - “I spend most of my time in the library or the lab, but when I am finally feeling like I can relax, I want something more meaningful to do than just sit and drink beer...I want to talk to someone!”
 - “I would love to see a greater variety of clubs and groups, just to see what types of students are attracted to them ... more involvement seems like a good thing, and I have found that students tend to take pride in being with each other in social settings – like we all made it here and we should celebrate together! I will definitely make the time for that part of my life here!”
 - “We need events that bring students from different departments together, since we rarely get to see anyone outside our majors-networking and making friends should not only happen after we graduate or be relegated to Facebook, but should happen while we are here – we want to find out about each other!”

Students do not tend to be haphazard in their allotment of time; they quickly learn that time management is an essential ingredient in success, both academically and socially. Many established survey programs query students about the amount of time they spend in a range of activities, from attending class to sleeping; the findings here suggest that students intuitively set aside time for interactions with each other to support their time in the classroom.

Conclusions and Implications

While students indicated a high level of satisfaction with student life programs, this study confirms many aspects of Astin's Theory of Involvement (1984), which suggests that a purposeful mix of activities and experiences positively affects a college student's development. Specific components of his theory surfaced in the focus group findings to further illustrate how students perceive and integrate these various parts of their lives.

The results of this phase of the study suggest that students require relevant, timely, and extensive personal communications about student life programs in order to motivate them to participate. The relationship between awareness and participation is evident, as is the subsequent relationship between participation and satisfaction. Ultimately, a student's satisfaction with their college experience yields a greater chance for persistence. Using electronic media to its maximum advantage, and identifying alternative communication strategies are vital to the success of reaching this new student population on today's campuses.

Equally important to students is the nature of the events offered to them and the intent of those events. Many students at this institution were focused on academics, first, and social activities, second; to that extent, the most successful programs were those that linked socialization opportunities with academic programs. For instance, students in the English department who attended a guest speaker series were happiest when a reception followed the speaker, allowing for interactions that related to an event they considered meaningful and substantive. The concept of adapting to the institutional ethos to construct the most meaningful set of offerings for students is an important consideration.

Students also indicated that all-campus events were desirable, particularly because they found that they rarely were able to interact with students outside of their major, due to the intensity of their course loads. All-campus dances, performances, and school-sponsored trips to New York City, for example, were the types of activities that held the greatest appeal. Shifting the focus from specialized programming to generalized programming, or at least re-distributing the balance in these programs, may secure greater participation from students.

One unexpected finding was the emphasis students placed on the types of campus spaces that would allow for informal and spontaneous gatherings, rather than depending on the pre-planned events. While structured activities were seen as beneficial, students felt that a certain amount of casual social connections were equally beneficial and could not be 'planned' to the same extent. These social interactions allowed for peer-to-peer interactions that formed the basis of their evolving psychosocial development. While available and usable physical space is an ongoing challenge on every college campus, Student Life staff can approach this issue creatively, by convening a committee of students to work with them to brainstorm around potential, untapped locales that may facilitate more interactions among students.

Athletic teams and intramural opportunities were viewed as an important component in the mix of all the student life program offerings, and were seen as a means to de-stress. Similarly, groups that focused on cultural, artistic, spiritual, communal, or governance issues were considered an essential ingredient in the student experience, albeit meaningful for a smaller portion of the population.

Finally, continuing a regular program of assessment in order to gauge student perceptions of student life programs is an important goal. This type of periodic research, combining survey research with focus group interviews, is an excellent means to monitoring trends, especially as new programs are introduced or current programs are revised. Orienting students to think about programming and their feelings about those programs, via a survey questionnaire, is a valuable means to conducting follow-up focus groups, where students can verbalize their feelings and attitudes about those experiences. The resulting information will support Student Life staff as they develop and regularly assess programs to support student success.

Undergraduate students require a substantive mix of student life programs to ensure a meaningful experience in college, and to supplement to their academic pursuits. Astin's work (1993) on the ways in which students are affected by their college experience can be supported by a study that assists student life professionals refine and strengthen programs. The second phase of this study is intended to support and add to the initial findings from the quantitative phase and augment the body of knowledge about

programming approaches that may provide valuable information to further student satisfaction with college.

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