

High-Impact Educational Experiences in Colleges of Business

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Abstract

The literature provides extensive evidence of the integration of high-impact educational experiences in the university through university core requirements and experiences coordinated through student services programs. The integration and assessment of such experiences within colleges of business is not highly documented. We surveyed business faculty and professional staff members who are actively involved in program assessment at their institutions to determine what innovative high-impact activities are integrated into their business programs to increase student engagement beyond learning in the traditional classroom and how the value of these activities is perceived and evaluated. The findings indicate that although business programs typically integrate high-impact educational experiences into their curricula, these experiences are not frequently assessed to determine if the intended student outcomes are achieved.

Key words: *Student engagement; high-impact activities; assessment; colleges of business.*

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Introduction

Since the 2008 publication of George D. Kuh's book *High-Impact Educational Practices: What They Are, Who Has Access to Them, and Why They Matter*, high-impact educational experiences have been integrated into university curricula at an increasing rate (Finley & McNair, 2013). Kuh validated through evidence 'that by treating these practices as a set of effective tools rather than as discrete experiences, faculty, administrators, and other campus professionals could begin to conceptualize the collective impact these practices have on indicators of student success and learning' (Finley & McNair, 2013, v). Kuh's expressed value of student engagement is reflected in the following statement by Pascarella and Terenzini (2005): 'Because individual effort and involvement are the critical determinants of college impact, institutions should focus on the ways they can shape their academic, interpersonal, and extracurricular offerings to encourage student engagement' (602). The business school accreditation association AACSB in its most recent accreditation standards (2013 eligibility procedures and accreditation standards for business accreditation, 2018) likewise reflects the value of engagement in the design and delivery of educational experiences for business students.

AACSB accreditation standards (2013 eligibility procedures and accreditation standards for business accreditation, 2018) state that business school curricula are expected to 'facilitate and encourage active student engagement in learning. In addition to time on task related to readings, course participation, knowledge development, projects, and assignments, students engage in experiential and active learning designed to be inclusive for diverse students, and to improve skills and the application of knowledge in practice' (32). The standards further define engagement as follows: 'Student academic and professional engagement occurs when students are actively involved in their educational experiences, in both academic and professional settings, and when they are able to connect these experiences in meaningful ways' (40). Schools of business are expected to 'document experiential learning activities that provide business students with knowledge of the experience in the local and global practice of business and management across program types and teaching/learning models employed' (41). Thus, with over a decade of emphasis on high-impact educational experiences and the expectations stated in the AACSB accreditation standard, business educators should determine if they are integrating appropriate high-impact complements into the traditional curricula. Included in this analysis should be evidence that the high-impact experiences are providing specific value-added to the student experience.

Literature Review

The literature provides extensive evidence of the integration of high-impact educational experiences in the university in general, such as through university core requirements and experiences coordinated through student services programs (Peden, 2017). The integration and assessment of such experiences within colleges of business, however, is not highly documented. This study is designed to identify examples of innovative high-impact activities that are being integrated into business programs to increase student engagement beyond learning in the traditional classroom and how the value of these activities is perceived and evaluated. The overall goal is to provide designers of business curricula guidance for assuring value from high-impact educational experiences. In this study the term 'High-Impact Activity' is defined as an educational experience that requires student engagement beyond that in a typical class, such as the following: creative problem solving, working collaboratively with others, applying knowledge in a real-world setting, reflecting on an education experience, producing an identified product, and/or documenting the synthesis/analysis of an experience.

This study is grounded in theoretical models relating to student engagement and experiential learning. Two theories are of relevance to this study: Astin's Student Involvement Theory (Astin, 1984) and Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (Kolb, *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*, 1984).

Astin (Astin, 1984) asserts that activities which require student involvement through physical and psychological investment of energy lead to student learning and personal development. Student investment of physical and mental energy is directly proportional to student learning and personal development. An educational environment that challenges students to become active in directing their education results in increased student knowledge and skill development. The National Survey of Student Engagement (<http://nsse.indiana.edu/html/about.cfm>) has used this theory extensively as a foundation for its research and concludes that 'what matters in student outcomes is student engagement in college activities' (Kuh, *What we're learning about student engagement from NSSE*, 2003, 751).

Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (Kolb, 1984) is the student engagement theory often cited by researchers and practitioners. Kolb based his theory on early research by Dewey, Lewin, and Piaget relating to (1) importance of experience in the learning process, (2) relevance of active participation in learning, and (3) conceptualizing that learned based on environmental interactions (Kumar & Bhandarker, 2017). Kolb's theory describes learning as a four-stage cycle: (1) engage in an authentic/concrete experience; (2) observe what happened and reflect on it in relation to past experiences; (3) think rationally about the experience and form abstract concepts; and (4) generalize and apply new ideas in other contexts. Kohl and Kolb (2005) stressed that having an experience without acting upon it in some way is not sufficient. The four-step process—experiencing, reflecting, thinking, acting—results in knowledge creation. Learning is a process whereby experiences are transformed to create new knowledge (Kumar & Bhandarker, 2017).

The Association for Experiential Education, a global community of experiential educators and practitioners, identifies the following principles of experiential education, which models Kohl's learning theory:

- Experiential learning occurs when carefully chosen experiences are supported by reflection, critical analysis and synthesis.
- Experiences are structured to require the learner to take initiative, make decisions and be accountable for results.
- Throughout the experiential learning process, the learner is actively engaged in posing questions, investigating, experimenting, being curious, solving problems, assuming responsibility, being creative, and constructing meaning.
- Learners are engaged intellectually, emotionally, socially, soulfully and/or physically. This involvement produces a perception that the learning task is authentic.
- The results of the learning are personal and form the basis for future experience and learning.
- Relationships are developed and nurtured: learner to self, learner to others and learner to the world at large.
- The educator and learner may experience success, failure, adventure, risk-taking and uncertainty, because the outcomes of experience cannot totally be predicted.
- Opportunities are nurtured for learners and educators to explore and examine their own values.
- The educator's primary roles include setting suitable experiences, posing problems, setting boundaries, supporting learners, insuring physical and emotional safety, and facilitating the learning process.

- The educator recognizes and encourages spontaneous opportunities for learning.
- Educators strive to be aware of their biases, judgments and pre-conceptions, and how these influence the learner.
- The design of the learning experience includes the possibility to learn from natural consequences, mistakes and successes (Association for Experiential Education, n.d.)

Building upon this theoretical base, the Association of American Colleges & Universities (AAC&U) through the LEAP Initiative (<https://www.aacu.org/leap>) has promoted educational initiatives that connect employers and educators to assure collegiate education prepares graduates for the demands of employment. One outcome has been published research on a group of widely tested high-impact teaching and learning practices (High-impact practices, n.d.):

- First-year seminars and experiences.
- Common intellectual experiences.
- Learning communities.
- Writing-intensive courses.
- Collaborative assignments and projects.
- Undergraduate research.
- Diversity/global learning.
- E-portfolios.
- Service learning, community-based learning.
- Internships.
- Capstone courses and projects.

When well designed, these practices have been found to be beneficial to all students but especially to those from disadvantaged backgrounds (Kuh, *High-impact educational practices: What they are, who has access to them, and why they matter*, 2008; Brownell & Swaner, *High-impact practices: Applying the learning outcomes literature to the development of successful campus programs*, 2009; Brownell & Swaner, *Outcomes of high-impact educational practices: A literature review*, 2009; Sandeen, 2012). Kuh (2008) reported strong positive effects associated with student participation in two first-year high-impact activities—learning communities and service learning—and in four senior-level activities—study abroad, student-faculty research, service learning, and senior culminating experience. In these activities gains were self-reported in three clusters of learning and personal development outcomes and in deep or integrative learning approaches: active and collaborative learning, student-faculty interaction, and supportive campus environment. Laird, Shoup, Kuh, and Schwarz (2008) found that students who use deep approaches to learning tend to earn higher grades and retain, integrate, and transfer learning at high rates. Further research has shown high-impact practices to be positively related to persistence and GPA, increases in critical thinking and writing skills, greater appreciation for diversity, and higher student engagement and related effects (Kuh, 2008; National Survey of Student Engagement, 2007). Kilgo, Ezell Sheets, and Pascarella (2015) analyzed longitudinal data to analyze effects of participating in the high-impact practices recommended by the AAC&U described earlier. They found overall support for integrating these practices as pathways to student learning and success.

Kahu's (2013) conceptual framework of student engagement, antecedents, and consequences highlights the multifaceted nature of student engagement. The framework begins with structural influences such as university culture, curriculum, and systems of assessment. Upon this structural foundation, students develop a psychosocial context of engagement with faculty and staff that, in combination with their motivation, self-identity, and self-efficacy, results in enthusiasm, participatory behavior, and deep learning. Student engagement thus results in academic

achievement, satisfaction, and retention and ultimately personal growth, work success, and lifelong learning.

Kahu's framework is now commonly used as a basis for empirical studies that examine different aspects of student engagement (Kahu, 2014; Maskell, 2017). Considering the importance of achieving the desired consequences of Kahu's (2013) conceptual framework, this study examines the structural influences necessary to achieve student engagement, particularly curricular and assessment programs designed to integrate and measure the value of high-impact activities.

The goal of this study is to answer the following research questions relating to high-impact activities being integrated into business programs to increase student engagement beyond the traditional classroom:

- What specific high-impact activities are being integrated into business programs?
- What percent of undergraduate students participate in at least one high-impact learning activity?
- Are the activities being formally assessed either directly or indirectly?
- Have formal learning or performance outcomes been identified so that student success can be measured?
- What tools are used to assess the value or impact achievement of high-impact activities?
- Does the business program use high-impact activities to help in program branding?
- What are the primary challenges faced in integrating and achieving value from high-impact activities?

From the research questions, the following null-hypotheses were developed:

- H₀₁:** High-impact activities will not be integrated into the business curriculum.
- H₀₂:** Business programs will not evaluate the success of their high-impact activities through formal assessment methods.
- H₀₃:** The integration of high-impact activities will have no relationship to the size of the business program.

Method

To address the research questions in this study, the researchers developed and validated a survey instrument. Three student services professionals with experience in providing high-impact activities and their assessment pilot tested the survey and provided suggestions for improvement. The survey questions asked are consistent with Kahu's (2013) conceptual framework of student engagement. In particular, structural and psychosocial influences that facilitate student engagement are measured in the questions that highlight the policies and curricular activities to document the desired outcomes of high-impact activities.

To address the research questions in this study, the researchers surveyed 100 business faculty or professional staff members who are actively involved in program assessment at their institutions. The random sample was taken from attendees at the 2017 and 2018 AACSB assessment conferences. Of 171 U.S. schools identified, contacts were located for 140 individuals still employed at the school or who have a

significant role in the assessment process. The survey was sent to the sample of 100 in May, 2018, with a follow-up sent in September, 2018. Responses were received from 28 schools, though 21 fully completed the survey. Based on analysis of the demographic and qualitative data from the surveys, the research questions and hypotheses were evaluated. Chi-square analysis was used to test hypothesis 2.

Of the respondents fully completing the survey, 20 institutions or 95 percent are AACSB accredited; the remaining respondent plans to seek AACSB accreditation within five years. Eighty-six percent of the respondents are public institutions. A broad distribution of size of institution is represented in the responses: 10 percent, 500 to 1,000 undergraduate business students; 29 percent, 1,001 to 1,500 undergraduate business students; 14 percent, 2,001 to 3,000 undergraduate business students; 47 percent, over 3,000 undergraduate business students. This analysis of the integration of high-impact educational experiences in business programs of varied sizes provided a cross-sectional view of AACSB-accredited schools.

Results

The results of the survey provide examples of types of high-impact activities integrated in colleges of business and indicate the extent to which the value of these activities is being formally evaluated.

Integration of High-Impact Activities and Student Involvement

Respondents were asked to indicate if certain high-impact activities, often identified as used in higher education, have been integrated into their undergraduate business programs. As shown in Table 1, the activities most often integrated are Collaboration Assignment/Project, Capstone Project/Experiences, Internships, and Student Competitions. The least often integrated is Learning Communities.

Table 1:

Types of High-Impact Activities Integrated into the Undergraduate Curriculum

Activity	% of Respondents Integrating
Collaboration Assignment/Project	93.3%
Capstone Project/Experience	87.5%
Internships	80.0%
Student Competitions	80.0%
1st Year Seminar and Experience	73.3%
Service Learning Projects	73.3%
Student-Faculty Research	73.3%
International Field Study	66.7%
Writing Intensive Courses	66.7%
Learning Communities	53.9%

When asked what percent of their undergraduate business students participate in at least one high-impact activity, 81 percent of the respondents indicate that 81 to 100 percent of their students participate; the remaining respondents indicate that 21 to 40 percent of their students participate. Sixty-nine percent of the respondents indicate that high-impact activities are available throughout the curriculum beginning in their freshman year. Thirty-one percent

of respondents indicated the activities are completed during the junior or senior year. Overall this sample of business schools is actively involved in making high-impact activities available to their students and achieve a relatively high participation rate, *though the activities are often course-based*. The majority of schools do attempt to engage students early in their educational experience.

Ho₁: Rejected

A variety of high-impact activities were found to be integrated into the business curriculum.

The following examples of well-developed high-impact activities, which complement the traditional curriculum, were identified:

- A first-year student success course focuses on the school's mission and history, connection with educational resources, career exploration, involvement in student organizations, and professional etiquette and networking.
- In a freshman learning community, students complete a money-management project to gain simulated work experience and opportunity to exhibit creativity.
- Competitions in real-world competitive environments which reflect the job market allow students to benchmark their skills and abilities with those with whom they will eventually compete in their career fields.
- Through corporate consulting projects students experience customer interaction in a professional environment.
- Corporate sponsors work with student research teams involving over 400 students to develop and present tangible solutions to current corporate problems. The focus is on effective communication, cost analysis, and feasible implementation strategies. Competition winners are determined by business judges.
- Internship experiences are developed as hybrid courses in which students must identify specific deliverables for direct assessment.
- A "Career Catalyst" program completed by all undergraduate students requires completion of "badges" (specific activities/experiences) revolving around the following areas: career development, ethics in the workplace, leadership and service, and high-impact experiential learning.

Evaluation and Assessment of High-Impact Activities

Only fifty-six percent of the respondents indicated that they have a formal system to coordinate the offering or requirement of high-impact activities to assure all students have a variety of experiences in their programs of study. In addition, the respondents were asked to indicate if formal learning or performance outcomes have been identified so that student success can be measured. Forty-four percent of the respondents indicated that specific outcomes have been identified for most or all high-impact activities; 31 percent indicated that specific outcomes have been identified for some targeted high-impact activities. Yet 25 percent of the respondents have specific outcomes for few or none of the high-impact activities.

Table 2 indicates that for many high-impact activities, formal assessment is not used to evaluate the value of the activities. This conclusion is consistent with the identified use of specific tools used to assess value of high-impact activities as shown in Table 3. For example, Internships are integrated in 80 percent of the responding schools. Yet the value of the internship to the student is directly evaluated only by 29 percent of the schools.

Only 50 percent of the respondents reported that evaluation of student learning outcomes of high-impact activities are part of the program's formal

assurance of learning process. Yet for many of the activities formal assessment methods are not used.

H₀₂: Rejected

Business programs reportedly do evaluate the success of their high-impact activities through formal assessment methods.

Table 2:

Assessment Approach Used to Evaluate Value of High-Impact Activities

Activity	% Schools Integrating	Method of Formal Assessment		
		Direct	Indirect	None
Collaboration Assignment/Project	93.3%	69.2%	15.4%	15.4%
Capstone Project/Experience	87.5%	71.4%	7.1%	21.4%
Internships	80.0%	28.6%	57.1%	14.3%
Student Competitions	80.0%	25.0%	33.3%	41.7%
1 st Year Seminar and Experience	73.3%	60.0%	0.0%	40.0%
Service Learning Projects	73.3%	36.4%	18.2%	45.4%
Student-Faculty Research	73.3%	23.1%	23.1%	53.9%
International Field Study	66.7%	54.5%	27.2%	18.2%
Writing Intensive Courses	66.7%	53.9%	0.0%	46.2%
Learning Communities	53.9%	25.0%	37.5%	37.5%

Table 3:

Tools Used to Assess Value or Impact Achievement of High-Impact Activities

Evaluation Tools	Always Use	Sometimes Use	Never Use
Rubric	56.3%	31.3%	12.5%
Performance	53.3%	40.0%	6.7%
Exam	28.6%	64.3%	7.1%
Observation	28.6%	57.1%	14.3%
Survey of Students/Faculty	28.6%	57.1%	14.3%
Questionnaire	23.1%	69.2%	7.7%
Reflection Journal	7.7%	53.9%	38.5%
Video	7.1%	57.1%	35.7%
E-Portfolio	0.0%	20.0%	80.0%
Focus Group	0.0%	54.6%	45.4%
Interview	0.0%	66.7%	33.3%

High-Impact Activities Used for Program Branding

Sixty-nine percent of the respondents indicated that their college does use the integration and outcomes of high-impact activities for program branding. The following are typical of the program components identified as branding opportunities:

- Use 'engaged learning' within college mission and advertising materials.

- Use the term '100% Engagement' throughout college literature with examples of corporate projects, student consulting projects, service learning, and 'Big Pitch' topics (capstone experience advancing 'best' business ideas).
- Distinguish educational experiences from those of regional competitors by highlighting required experiential learning.

Challenges of Integrating and Achieving Value from High-Impact Activities

As reflected in the literature, integrating high-impact activities into the curricula is challenging. Respondents identified the following top challenges they have experienced:

- Motivating faculty to develop appropriate high-impact activities with measurable outcomes without a well-developed statement of purpose and strategy for high-impact activities and a corresponding plan and resources for implementation.
- Motivating faculty and staff to participate in complementary activities which often do not generate additional credit hours or other revenue to cover costs.
- Effectively communicating the value of high-impact activities to students so they will eagerly buy-in and view the activities as vital for their career success, versus just another degree requirements.
- Motivating students to expend the required effort to successfully complete high-impact activities.
- Identifying specific student learning outcomes.
- Determining how to assess the value of high-impact activities such as mentorship with a member of the business community: does the activity in and of itself have innate value or should a specific deliverable that could be evaluated be required—such as using community engagement to improve communication skills?
- Assessing the value of high-impact activities without established metrics for evaluation that match specific activities.
- Matching students to reasonable projects, especially in a metropolitan school.
- 'Closing the loop' (completing in-depth evaluation) on high-impact activities.
- Finding a way to gather valid feedback from students upon completion of projects without overwhelming the students upon the completion of the semester.
- Finding an effective way to promote, track, and managing high-impact activities.
- Coordinating corporate-based activities, which is extremely time consuming, and obtaining corporate sponsors/participants semester after semester.
- Assuring consistency among judges for competitions, especially those from industry, and thus assuring equity and fairness to all students.
- Providing effective feedback to all participants in activities such as competitions or consulting projects which culminate at the end of the semester.

Analysis by Size of Business Program

The undergraduate programs included in the study were divided into two groups to determine if high-impact activities are integrated and evaluated differently in small and large programs. Pearson's chi square test, as shown in Table 4, was used to test the null hypotheses that the integration of high-impact activities has no relationship to the size of the business program.

Table 4:

Test of differences in high impact activities integrated into large and small undergraduate programs.

Activity	Large	Small
Capstone Course	5	9
Collaboration	7	7
First Year Seminar	4	7
Internships	6	6
Learning Communities	4	3
Service Learning	6	5
Student/Faculty Research	7	4
Student Competitions	7	5
Trip/Field Study	5	5
Writing Intensive Courses	6	4
Other	0	1
Chi Test Result	.90746 > .05	Not significant

The results indicate at the .05 level no significant differences among sizes of programs regarding (1) the types of activities integrated in the undergraduate business programs, (2) when during the undergraduate program students are involved in high-impact activities, (3) the formal systems used to coordinate the offering or requirement of high-impact activities to ensure all students have a variety of experiences, and (4) the formal assurance of learning process used to ensure the evaluation of student learning outcomes of high-impact activities. Overall the results suggest that high-impact activities can be integrated, managed, and assessed in varied academic environments regardless of program size.

H₀₃: Accepted

The results indicate that the integration of high-impact activities has no relationship to the size of the business program.

Conclusions

The schools participating in this study are integrating a variety of high-impact activities into their business programs, with high student participation rates. The majority of schools use their integration of high-impact activities as a distinguishing factor in their program branding. Integration of high-impact activities was consistent across all sizes of business programs. The majority of the schools do attempt to engage students beginning in their freshman year. Although 56 percent of the respondents indicated they have a formal system to coordinate the offering of high-impact activities, only 44 percent have identified specific performance outcomes for student success for most or all high-impact activities; 25 percent have specific outcomes for few or none of the activities. In addition, for many high-impact activities formal assessment is not used to evaluate the value of the activities. Only 50 percent of the respondents indicated that the evaluation of high-impact activities is part of the formal program assessment system. Both Astin (1984) and Kolb (1984) emphasized the importance of evaluating student outcomes based on specific high-impact program objectives to assure appropriate student involvement and engagement.

Despite the perceived value of high-impact activities, respondents indicate that difficulty in gaining faculty, staff, and student buy-in and participation creates obstacles to desired outcome achievement. One respondent noted, "The lack of a developed

statement of purpose and strategy for HI activities and how they should be designed to provide value to students make it difficult to motivate faculty to develop appropriate HI activities and measurable outcomes. Assessing the value of HI activities is difficult without established metrics for evaluation that match varied activities.” Overall challenges of integrating high-impact activities into the curriculum can be characterized as challenges of commitment and system design and documentation, as posited by Kahu’s (2013) framework.

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