



[Focus on Emerging Scholars Column]

## WHAT DOES “HIGH-IMPACT” MEAN IN EXTRACURRICULAR EXPERIENCES?

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### ABSTRACT

*This study, conducted by a small group in a master’s level class taught by Dr. Christine Wilson, assessed extracurricular experiences at a large, public university to identify potential alignment with characteristics of “high-impact practices” as defined by the Center for Postsecondary Education (2015). Students engaged in extracurricular experiences tentatively defined as high-impact were invited to participate via surveys and interviews. Results and findings indicated significant alignment, and two additional potential characteristics: a sense of belonging and purpose.*

The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) has been used to collect data on college student engagement. Kuh and colleagues used this data to determine “high-impact practices,” which are positively correlated with persistence and student learning (Center for Postsecondary Research, 2018, 2007). High-impact practices can be curricular or co-curricular engagement experiences, and little is known about whether the characteristics of high-impact experiences apply to exclusively extracurricular engagement experiences.

Student affairs professionals offer experiences designed to contribute to learning, often in the extracurricular environment. If student affairs professionals understand the characteristics of high-impact *extracurricular* experiences, appropriate criteria could be used to evaluate and enhance extracurricular experiences. This enhancement could be part of institutional efforts to foster engagement and improve the reach and quality of education (Kuh, 2009). This study sought to address a student affairs division’s need to define what “high-impact” could mean for extracurricular experiences in order to help staff enhance and create high-impact extracurricular experiences, and subsequently positively impact learning and persistence.

### STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AND HIGH-IMPACT PRACTICES

Student engagement refers to two aspects of the college student experience: the time and effort students expend on academic endeavors and other educational activities, and how institutions structure curricula and other opportunities to facilitate participation in activities empirically linked to student learning (Center for Postsecondary Research, 2017). There are many benefits of student engagement, including stronger academic performance, greater connections with peers and the institution, higher matriculation, and higher retention (Hansen

& Schmidt, 2017; Kahn, 2014; Masika & Jones, 2016; Millican & Bourner, 2011; Price & Tovar, 2014; Reason, Terenzini, & Domingo, 2007; Thelin & Gasman, 2003). These benefits also impact persistence; engaged students are more likely to continue to graduation (Masika & Jones, 2015; Thelin & Gasman, 2003).

The National Survey for Student Engagement (NSSE) is distributed annually to hundreds of four-year colleges and universities to collect information regarding students' participation in learning and personal development opportunities (Center for Postsecondary Research, 2017). The survey is "specifically designed to assess the extent to which students are engaged in empirically derived good educational practices and what they gain from their college experience" (Kuh, 2001, p. 2).

NSSE data have been used to determine that some types of engagement opportunities are "high-impact practices:" student participation in learning communities, service-learning, research with faculty, internship or field experiences, study abroad, and culminating senior experiences (Center for Postsecondary Education, 2015). "High-impact activities seem to have unusually powerful effects on all students" (Kuh, 2009, p. 695). These high-impact practices share several characteristics: they require considerable time and effort, facilitate learning outside of the classroom, require meaningful interactions with faculty and other students, encourage collaboration with diverse others, and provide frequent and substantive feedback; participation in them may be life-changing (Center for Postsecondary Research, 2015). Student engagement in high-impact experiences also has the same positive outcomes for historically underserved students, including students representing different racial and ethnic backgrounds, first-generation college students, and students who were less prepared for college (AAC&U, 2018; Kuh, 2009).

## A DEFINITION OF "EXTRACURRICULAR"?

The Center for Postsecondary Research limited its investigation of high-impact practices to academic curricula (2015). However, "the student affairs profession has long embraced various iterations of the student engagement construct" (Kuh, 2009, p. 696), recognizing that many engagement opportunities facilitated by student affairs practitioners take place outside of academic curricula.

Bartkus, Kennet, Nemelka, and Gardner (2012) point to the absence of a field-wide consensus on the definition of "extracurricular activities." Some scholars have defined extracurricular activities by key elements, such as activities occurring outside of the classroom, activities not tied to academic credit, voluntary activities, activities enhancing transferrable skill development, and activities requiring psychological energy and commitment (Bartkus, Kennet, Nemelka, & Gardner, 2012; Chan, 2016; Kuh 2009). Most of these key elements also apply to curricular and co-curricular activities experiences, which is problematic.

Student engagement can occur in curricular, co-curricular, and extracurricular environments. While the terms "co-curricular" and "extracurricular" may be used interchangeably, they are different. "Co" means "together with" and "extra" means "outside of" (Mirriam-Webster, 2018). Curricular / co-curricular activities are tied to academic learning and attached to academic credit. Extracurricular engagement happens outside of the academic sphere and does not result in academic credit (Bartkus, Kennet, Nemelka, & Gardner, 2012; Chan, 2016; Greene & Maggs, 2015), but can help increase the odds that students will attain their educational and personal objectives (Kuh, 2009, p. 698). For this study, extracurricular experiences were defined as *student engagement opportunities taking place outside of the academic curriculum and not attached to academic credit*.

## PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Student affairs practitioners at this institution, as part of their work to support the academic mission of the institution, wanted to assure the availability of a variety of high-impact experiences for undergraduate students, including extracurricular experiences. These practitioners sought to support Kuh's (2009) call to monitor high impact engagement opportunities and to find ways to "scale them up to create enough opportunities so that every student has a real chance to participate" (p. 698). The Division of Student Affairs planned to create an inventory for their agenda of extracurricular experiences, and to train staff members regarding characteristics

of high-impact extracurricular experiences so they could enhance existing experiences and be intentional when creating new experiences. As they embarked upon this endeavor, though, they did not want to assume the characteristics of high-impact practices automatically applied to extracurricular experiences.

The purpose of this study was to determine whether the Center for Postsecondary Research's (2015) characteristics of high-impact practices could apply to extracurricular experiences. To determine these characteristics, the group sought to answer the following question: Which characteristics of high-impact practices align with the characteristics of the potentially high-impact extracurricular experiences? Which do not? Are there additional characteristics specific to these extracurricular experiences?

## METHODS

### *Setting*

This study was conducted at a large, public, land grant institution in the northeast region of the United States. According to the Office of Institutional Research and Effectiveness (2017), 22,383 undergraduates were enrolled in fall 2017; 11,404 identified as female, 10,979 as male; 2,678 as Hispanic/Latino, 2,527 as Asian, 1,543 as Black/African American, 12,613 as White, 1,611 as international, and 700 as two or more races. The institution does not collect information on student sexual orientation or religion.

This study focused on eight extracurricular experiences which may be high-impact; the descriptions include what may be the characteristics of the Center for Postsecondary Research's (2015) high-impact practices: they demand considerable time and effort, provide opportunities for learning outside of the classroom, encourage collaboration with diverse others, provide meaningful interactions with other students and staff (instead of faculty), provide frequent and substantive feedback, and are potentially life-changing.

The eight extracurricular experiences represented three categories. *Registered student organizations* (n=2) were the most independent experiences and had professional and/or graduate student advisors who supported the student leaders but did not dictate the components of the experiences. *University programs* (n=3) were developmental experiences related to service and/or leadership development lasting for at least a semester and were designed and facilitated by professional staff or graduate assistants. *Student employment positions* (n=3) were paid experiences. Students were supervised by professional or graduate staff members, and the students participated in training and professional development sessions. The study authors believed it important to include paid experiences in the sample to help assure students who may not be financially able to participate in voluntary high-impact experiences could be assured opportunities to participate in high-impact experiences through student employment.

### *Participants*

In fall 2017, N=221 undergraduate students participated in these eight experiences. All 221 were recruited to participate in the anonymous survey via an initial email from their supervisors/advisors through an online platform. To encourage participation in the survey, participants could enter a raffle to win one of two bookstore gift cards worth \$25. For the interviews, participants were recruited via email using a stratified sampling process to assure interview participants would represent the eight experiences. To encourage participation in the interviews, participants were offered \$5 gift cards redeemable at campus coffee shops.

Twenty-seven students representing all eight experiences finished the survey, resulting in a confidence interval of  $95 \pm 17\%$ . Participants were asked to indicate which of the eight experiences they were engaged in; if they participated in more than one, they were directed to choose the one they felt had the greatest impact on them. Nine participants indicated "university program," nine indicated "registered student organization(s)," and nine indicated "student employment." Of those who described a race and/or ethnicity, 13 participants self-described as White, two as Black/African-American, four as Latinx, five as Asian, and four as American. Of those who self-described a gender identity or gender expression, 19 described themselves as female/woman/feminine, four as male, and one as genderqueer. Nineteen participants self-described as heterosexual/straight, one as gay, and one as pansexual. Nine students indicated they were not religious. Two indicated spiritual, six Catholic, five

Christian, one Jewish, one Muslim, and one Hindu.

Five participants were interviewed, and each completed a post-interview survey to self-describe demographic information. Three participants indicated they participated in university programs, one in registered student organization(s), and one in student employment. Four participants identified as white, one as African-American. Three participants self-identified as female/woman, two as male. All five identified themselves as heterosexual/straight.

## DATA COLLECTION

The self-developed, anonymous survey was administered through an online platform. The survey was constructed to gather participants' perceptions information of the extracurricular experiences based on the Center for Postsecondary Education's (2015) characteristics of high-impact practices. The survey included 14 Likert scale questions, 26 drop down selection items, and 13 open-ended questions, including eight open-ended demographic questions. The interviews were semi-structured and included three open-ended questions about participants' chosen extracurricular experiences. At the conclusion of the interview, participants completed a demographic survey in which they self-described demographic information.

## DATA ANALYSIS

**Quantitative.** First, the data was analyzed to determine the percentage responses for each question related to the characteristics of high-impact practices. Next, to determine whether the participants' perceptions of the extracurricular experiences varied among the categories (registered student organizations, university programs, student employment), ANOVAs were conducted. Inferences of the statistical significance of the F-statistic were made at two alpha criteria: the standard  $\alpha=.05$  and adjusted  $\alpha=.0026$ . Because this approach included 19 comparisons, the alpha criterion was adjusted using the Bonferroni correction, (i.e.,  $\alpha=.05/19$  or  $\alpha=.0026$ ) to reduce the likelihood of committing type I errors. Finally, to ascertain if students' perceptions differed between the paid (student employment) and unpaid experiences (registered student organizations, university programs), 19 independent samples t-tests were conducted. Again, inferences of t-statistic were made using two alpha criteria: the standard ( $\alpha=.05$ ) and Bonferroni-corrected ( $\alpha=.0026$ ).

**Qualitative.** First, group members open coded all five verbatim interview transcripts and the open-ended questions on the survey individually and determined their own themes. The group then met to cross-compare their themes, to consider differences and overlaps, and to determine a mutually agreed upon list of themes. Next, the group identified categories of themes and created a spreadsheet documenting quotes and comments as evidence of the themes. Finally, the list of themes and evidence were compared to the characteristics of high-impact experiences.

## LIMITATIONS

A significant limitation was the response rate. The survey confidence interval was  $95 \pm 17\%$ , lower than the goal of  $\pm 10\%$ . Fortunately, all eight experiences were represented. Five of the eight experiences were represented in the interviews. The survey instrument and interview protocol were developed by the team and not tested for validity before administration. Also, the same population was utilized for the survey and interviews, so there may have been overlap in participants. Fourth, African-American students, Latinx students, and male students were not represented proportionately to the campus population, and all of the students interviewed identified as heterosexual. Finally, there were many other extracurricular experiences at the institution that may have had most of the characteristics of high impact practices, and only eight were used in this study.

## RESULTS AND FINDINGS

### Quantitative Survey Questions

The first set of results comes from the survey questions related to the characteristics of high-impact practices.

The *amount of time spent in the experiences* varied widely: 24% of survey participants indicated spending 4-7 hours per week in the experience, 41% spent 8-10, 14% spent 11-14, 7% spent 15-18, and 10% spent 20+ hours in the experience. Twenty-one percent thought this was the right amount of time, and 17% thought this was too much time. Twenty-eight percent of the participants *met with professional staff* bi-weekly and 48% weekly; 100% agreed or strongly agreed professional staff members positively impacted their experiences. The same percentages of participants *met with graduate staff* bi-weekly or weekly, but fewer (89%) agreed graduate student staff members positively impacted their experiences. One-hundred percent indicated *working with peers* in their experiences; 44% worked with their peers for more than 9 hours per week, and 97% indicated working with peers had a positive impact on their experiences. In terms of working with *students different from themselves*, 77% of participants indicated the experiences allowed them to “often” or “very often” interact with students with different races or ethnicities, 85% with students from different economic backgrounds, 50% with students from different religious backgrounds (23% did not know), 40% with students from different political backgrounds (10% did not know; 20% said “never” or “almost never”), and 42% with students with different sexual orientations (15% did not know; 15% said “never” or “almost never”). Eighty-eight percent of participants received feedback, and the top three types of feedback were one-on-one meetings (78%), 48% via email (48%), and end of the semester evaluations (44%; no students in registered student organizations had end-of-the-semester evaluations). *Learning outside of the classroom* occurred not just through general participation, but also via training and professional development opportunities; 100% of participants participated in at least one of eight training and development topics (95% interpersonal skills, 85% diversity, 77% role-specific training, and 73% problem solving). Seventy-seven percent indicated training and development positively impacted their experiences.

Next, ANOVAs were conducted to determine the differences among the three categories of involvement (registered student organizations, university programs, and student employment). Only four were statistically significant. The perceived impact of professional staff ( $F=3.52, p=.047$ ), interaction with graduate staff ( $F=60.154, p=.000$ ), participating in training ( $F=3.434, p=.05$ ), and interactions with peers with different political views ( $F=4.842, p=.022$ ) were significant. Post-hoc analysis indicated student employees were more likely to report higher perceptions of the impact of professional staff (mean diff,  $d+0.333, p+.085$ ), and were more likely to interact with graduate staff than students involved in university programs ( $d=0.889, p=0$ ). Similarly, participants registered student organizations were more likely to interact with graduate staff than participants in university programs ( $d=.889, p=.000$ ), and interact with peers with different political views than those involved in university programs ( $d=1.875, p=.034$ ).

Finally, t-tests were run to determine if there were statistically significant differences between students involved in paid and unpaid experiences, and two were: student employees were more likely to interact with graduate staff, ( $t=3.618, p=.002$ ) and they perceived greater impact of training on their experience ( $t=2.067, p=.05$ ).

### **Interview and Open-Ended Survey Questions**

Three categories emerged from the interviews and open-ended questions on the survey: self, context, and connection. “Self” was defined as participants’ personal ways of participating in the experiences and the influence on themselves, and included three themes: life-changing, development, and a sense of purpose. Participants indicated the experiences provided opportunities for personal, professional, and skill development. In addition, the purpose of the experiences mattered; participants wanted to be part of experiences making positive differences. “Context” referred to the environments the participants were working/participating in and included five themes: time, leading peers, diversity, feedback, and learning in different settings. “Connection” referred to interpersonal development perceived to be a result of the participants’ involvement with the experiences and included two themes: sense of belonging and interactions. Participants asserted their experiences helped them feel connected to groups of people providing support and encouraged growth. The most positive comments related to the impact of staff and highlighted their support, availability, and helpfulness.

## **DISCUSSION**

Four of the Center for Postsecondary Education’s characteristics of high-impact practices (2015) were clearly pres-

ent across the experiences. All of the participants indicated *working with their peers*, and 97% indicated working with peers had a positive impact on their experiences. Peers were perceived as providing support and mutual reliance. One-hundred percent of the students perceived they were engaged in *learning outside the classroom* including training and professional development opportunities, most in at least two different topics. Most of the participants (88%) received *feedback*, and about half of them received it in at least two ways. Students indicated feedback was essential and produced growth. And students perceived the experiences to be *life-changing*.

One characteristic was less present. Regarding *interacting with diverse others*, results were mixed. Seventy-seven percent of participants spent time interacting with students of races different from themselves often or very often, and 85% with students from different economic backgrounds. Participants were less likely to know if their peers had different religions or sexual orientations, and when they did know, they were not as likely to interact with them (50% and 42%, respectively). The area of the least interaction with differences was political views—20% said “never” or “almost never,” and only 40% indicated any interaction with students with different political views in their experiences.

Another characteristic, *considerable time and effort*, was harder to determine. The amount of time spent in the experiences varied widely: from 24% spending 4-7 hours to 10% spending 20+ hours; the mode was 8-10 hours (41%). And what was or did participants or staff perceive to be, ‘considerable’? The results and findings did not help define this characteristic.

The final characteristic is *time and quality of interaction with professional and graduate staff*. Seventy-six percent of participants met either weekly or bi-weekly with professional staff or graduate staff, and they felt staff were available, supportive, and helpful. All participants indicated their interactions with professional staff positively impacted their experiences, and 89% said graduate student staff had. Such impact seems to align with *meaningful interaction with faculty*.

The findings did reveal additional potential characteristics of high-impact extracurricular experiences. *Sense of belonging* emerged as a theme. Participants described positive feelings and meaning attached to belonging to groups or staffs. *Purpose* also emerged as a theme, as participants indicated they wanted to work towards specific goals and be part of activities making positive differences on or off campus.

To summarize, the combination of the results and findings gives campus activities professionals a better idea of the characteristics of “high-impact” in extracurricular experiences at this institution. The experiences reflected most of the Center for Postsecondary Education’s (2015) characteristics of high-impact experiences. Our results strongly suggested significant learning took place outside of the classroom. Interactions with peers, professional staff, and graduate student staff, as well as the feedback received, were significant and meaningful. Students considered the experiences to be life-changing. In addition, sense of belonging and the purpose of the experiences seem to matter on this campus. But there were gaps related to some dimensions of ‘interactions with diverse others,’ and ‘considerable time’ and effort was unable to be defined.

## IMPLICATIONS

Student affairs practitioners should consider replicating this study with students in other extracurricular experiences that may be high-impact. This study was exploratory; conclusions could be modified, confirmed, or expanded with replication. In addition, there are other perspectives to include and understand, particularly the perspectives of marginalized groups and males, who were underrepresented in the sample. Given the conclusions of this study, future researchers and assessors may want to include questions on the survey related to sense of belonging and purpose, and to determine what ‘considerable time’ means. The group feels it is important to assure interview questions are open-ended so participants can describe their experiences in an unguided way. Perspectives of the professionals who develop and facilitate these experiences would also be valuable.

This study tentatively demonstrates that most of the Center for Postsecondary Education’s (2015) characteristics

of high-impact are applicable when designing extracurricular experiences to be high impact: learning facilitated outside of the classroom, meaningful interactions with staff and other students, frequent and substantive feedback. Further, sense of belonging and purpose of the activities (making positive differences) are also important characteristics to consider. The scope and nature of ‘interactions with diverse others’ and ‘considerable time and effort’ were not supported by the results and findings. However, they should be considered as characteristics for high impact extracurricular experiences and additional studies, given their importance in student engagement (Kuh, 2008), and given that these results are tentative.

If student affairs practitioners are to actualize Kuh’s (2009) call to “create enough opportunities so that every student has a real chance to participate” (p. 698) in high impact practices, they must ponder, articulate, and share how the experiences they oversee include the characteristics of high impact practices. They should also assure articulation of the positive differences students can make, and nurture a sense of belonging in groups and staffs. Endeavoring in this valuable work supports the academic mission of institutions and can cultivate campus cultures that foster student success (Kuh, 2009).

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