

LYNN E. SWANER

Linking Engaged Learning, and Well-Being, and Civic

A Review of the Literature

FEATURED TOPIC

Current prevention literature recommends a shift from targeted interventions toward community-level approaches in addressing students' mental health concerns

A GROWING NUMBER of colleges and universities are endorsing the realization of students' full potential—including their well-being and civic development—as central to the mission of higher education. Concurrently, substance

abuse and depression have reached crisis

levels on the college campus, spurring calls for institutions to develop campus-wide, community-level prevention strategies in response. The Bringing Theory to Practice project asks whether and how engaged learning, an emergent wave of curricular reform, might both advance the holistic mission of higher education and constitute a strategy for addressing substance abuse and depression on campus. To this end, a review of the literature was conducted to examine theoretical and research bases for linking engaged learning, student mental health and well-being, and civic development. The findings of this review are discussed here in brief; the full review is available online at www.aacu.org/bringing_theory.

Defining engaged learning

Before considering whether and how engaged learning may be linked with student mental health and well-being and with civic development, an understanding of what is meant by the term *engaged learning* is needed. Rather

than being concretely defined in the literature, the concept of engaged learning emerges from multiple theoretical frameworks and educational practices. It is helpful therefore to begin by examining the two concepts of which it is comprised—*learning* and *engagement* in college.

"Learning" in college

As would be expected, there is substantial evidence that students experience gains in content knowledge during college, particularly in their major (Pascarella and Terenzini 1991). However, there is evidence that learning in college extends beyond simple content acquisition to involve the development of increasing cognitive complexity, multiple domains of self as loci for learning, and active processes that are integrative of experience and reflection.

In terms of cognitive development, Perry (1970) found that as students become more capable of recognizing and incorporating diverse perspectives into their worldviews, they in turn develop increasingly complex ways of thinking, knowing, and making meaning. Through the positions of Perry's model, or "scheme," students move from a dualistic worldview that endorses absolute right and wrong to a recognition of multiple and potentially valid perspectives and then to a contextually relative approach to judging the adequacy of differing perspectives. This developmental path is echoed in the work of Belenky et al. (1997), who describe women's development in terms of increasingly complex ways of knowing and understanding self; in this view, students

LYNN E. SWANER is assistant professor of counseling and development at the C. W. Post Campus of Long Island University and cross-site evaluator for the Bringing Theory to Practice project.

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shift from relying on external authorities for self-knowledge to recognizing themselves as authorities and finally to reconstructing knowledge generated both external to and within the self. Similar development is also described by King and Kitchener (1994), who discuss how students learn to comprehend and address the complexity inherent in ill-structured problems, and by Baxter-Magolda (1992, 2004), who focuses on how students develop a more complex sense of knowledge and self. A range of psychosocial theories extend this developmental view beyond the cognitive domain to areas such as students' identities, social interactions, affect, moral values, and life plans and purposes (Chickering and Reisser 1993).

In addition to these perspectives, adult and experiential learning theory holds that students learn best from the integration of experience, reflection, and action in an iterative cycle

(Kolb 1984; Hutchings and Wutzdorff 1988; Schön 1987; Garvin 2000). Such learning is inherently active, in that it requires ongoing experimentation rather than passive absorption of information. It may also involve transformation as individuals come to question, test, and reformulate their ways of making meaning and, in doing so, their views of themselves and the world in which they live (Mezirow 1991). Finally, rather than occurring in a vacuum, learning requires engagement with social contexts, as learners construct shared meaning in collaboration with others in their communities (Wenger 1998). These descriptions are particularly salient because much of the pedagogy that is considered "engaged" in higher education—such as service learning and community-based research—has adult and experiential learning theory as its conceptual framework.

“Engagement” in college

There is considerable confusion in the literature regarding the term “engagement,” which is further compounded by its growing popularity among scholars and practitioners. Two distinct definitional strands for the term are evident and can be differentiated by their answer to the question, *with what are students engaged?*

The first, the *involvement perspective* of engagement, posits that students are engaged in educational experiences that lead to better learning outcomes. In this perspective, engagement in learning is a function of student motivation and effort, as well as the degree to which learning environments are conducive to student involvement. This perspective is grounded in Astin’s work (1984, 1993), in which student involvement in academics was directly correlated with learning, performance, and retention. Kuh et al. (1991), in their study of “involving” colleges, found that the quality of students’ undergraduate experience was also related to involvement in campus life. The responsibility for involvement is not solely the student’s, however; Kuh explains that institutions foster involvement by “encouraging students to put forth more effort (e.g., write more papers, read more books, meet more frequently with faculty and peers, use information technology appropriately) which will result in greater gains” (2003, 1).

Although earlier writing from this perspective used the term “involvement,” a shift in recent years—as exemplified by the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE)—appears to have replaced this word with the term “engagement” without a significant change in meaning. For example, in describing NSSE’s conceptual framework, Kuh explains (2003, 1–2), “What students *do* during college counts more in terms of desired outcomes than who they are or even where they go to college . . . [NSSE is] specifically designed to assess the extent to which students are engaged in empirically derived good educational practices.” This reflects the involvement perspective underlying NSSE as well as the shift toward the term “engaged” instead of involvement.

The second perspective, that of *civic engagement*, holds that students are engaged with larger communities beyond the campus. As widely employed in service-learning literature, this concept of engagement reflects two philosophies: the civic model, which focuses

on enabling students to become active, informed, and empowered citizens of a participatory democracy (Hoppe 2004), and the communitarian model, which places emphasis on the responsibilities of individuals to the larger communities of which they are a part (Etzioni 1995). These perspectives coexist in the literature as well as in practice, which suggests that civic engagement entails the development of both citizenship capacities necessary for participatory democracy and social responsibility necessary for community membership. From the service-learning literature, this is evident in Jacoby’s “working” definition of civic engagement:

Civic engagement is a heightened sense of responsibility to one’s communities that includes a wide range of activities, including developing civic sensitivity, participation in building civil society, and benefiting the common good. Civic engagement encompasses the notions of global citizenship and interdependence where individuals—as citizens of their communities, their nations, and the world—are empowered as agents of positive social change for a more democratic world. (2004, 10)

According to Jacoby, this definition is operationalized when students develop informed perspectives; actively participate in civic life; serve as leaders; promote social justice; develop empathy, values, and social responsibility; and reflect critically on diversity and democracy.

Engaged learning: Toward a definition

Although the current state of the literature does not provide a unifying definition of engaged learning, these perspectives of learning and engagement in college provide starting points. Both an involvement perspective and a civic engagement perspective would endorse engaged learning as being active, integrative of experience, marked by increasingly complex ways of knowing and doing, interactive with social contexts, and holistic in its encompassment of multiple domains of self. However, the civic engagement perspective adds to this description the development of students’ civic capacities for democratic participation and responsible engagement in community life.

Although conceptually these two definitions may coexist in institutional mission statements—and in the best hopes of college educators—they are still far apart in the literature. Further

work is needed to determine if and how they should be merged, particularly given the divergent use of the terminology of “engagement.” In practice, however, there is already promise of such movement: at the crossroads of these two perspectives of engaged learning stand common pedagogical practices, or what Edgerton (1997) describes as *pedagogies for engaged learning*.

Pedagogy at the crossroads

Innovational pedagogical practice in higher education has provided meeting ground for the involvement and civic engagement perspectives of learning in college. Edgerton, in his *Higher Education White Paper* developed for the Pew Charitable Trusts, cites such pedagogies for engaged learning as both deepening student learning and fostering civic development:

The dominant mode of teaching and learning in higher education [is] “teaching as telling; learning as recall.” As we have seen, this mode of instruction fails to help students acquire two kinds of learning that are now crucial to their individual success and critically needed by our society at large. The first is real understanding. The second is “habits of the heart” that motivate students to be caring citizens. *Both of these qualities are acquired through pedagogies that elicit intense engagement.* (1997, 67, emphasis added)

Similarly, Benson and Harkavy describe service learning as one of “a handful of creative, active pedagogies . . . that enhance a student’s capacity to think critically, problem solve, and function as a citizen in a democratic society” (2002, 362, emphasis added).

Engaged learning pedagogy is fundamentally different from much of the teaching and learning that occurs in higher education. Traditional approaches involve the transmission of static knowledge from expert faculty to novice students (Freire 1970; Howard 1998), while engaged learning pedagogies share the assumption that knowledge is actively co-constructed by communities of teachers and learners (Palmer 1998). Both Edgerton and Colby et al. (2003) identify a small number of such engaged pedagogies—what Edgerton calls “strands of reform” (1997, 67) in higher education. These include

- *service learning*, which combines volunteer experience in the community with academic coursework and structured reflection (Jacoby 1996; Eyler and Giles 1999);

- *community-based research*, which involves faculty, students, and community members in joint research to solve community problems (Strand et al. 2003; Nyden 2003);
- *collaborative learning*, which actively engages students in learning from peers as well as faculty (MacGregor 1990; Bruffee 1993);
- *problem-based learning*, which structures students’ learning around the study of complex, real-world problems (Wilkerson and Feletti 1989; Barrows 1996).

In addition, several forms of engaged learning are described in the literature that do not correspond fully to these strands. These include intergroup dialogue (Schoem and Hurtado 2001), cocurricular service, internships, interdisciplinary team teaching, and learning communities (a detailed discussion of each is offered in the full literature review).

Research has established that many of these approaches enhance learning, increase content mastery, encourage critical thinking, and foster personal development (Pascarella and Terenzini 2005; Eyler and Giles 1999). Yet despite such evidence, engaged learning experiences are offered only on a limited and elective basis on most campuses. Most students do not participate in such opportunities or may only do so once during college. The value-added of these pedagogies may thus be limited by their isolated use in higher education, as Eyler and Giles assert that “no single intervention, particularly over the course of a semester, can be expected to have a dramatic impact on student outcomes” (1999, xvii).

For such an impact to occur, engaged pedagogies must move from being exceptions to being building blocks for a fundamental transformation in the way faculty “teach” and students “learn” in higher education. By shifting engaged pedagogy and its philosophical base from the periphery to the center of educational practice, institutions move toward establishing larger cultures of engagement that can harness the full promise of engaged learning.

Linkages with mental health and well-being

Like the concept of engaged learning, “mental health” and “well-being” are complex constructs in need of definition. They are broadly described in the literature as encompassing individuals’ abilities to realize their potential, cope with stress, relate positively with others, make healthy decisions, and contribute to

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community (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration 2005; World Health Organization 2005). In conceptualizing these constructs on the college campus, the Bringing Theory to Practice project has chosen to focus its efforts on two issues—substance abuse and depression—that not only significantly contribute to students’ mental health and well-being, but also are of “epidemic” proportions on campus (Wechsler and Wuethrich 2002; Kadison and DiGeronimo 2004).

Evidence suggests that despite the critical nature of these problems, colleges and universities have been largely unsuccessful in addressing them. This is perhaps because, though the causes of substance abuse and depression involve both personal and environmental factors, typical prevention efforts tend to be univariate (e.g., offering alcohol-free events, or disseminating data on the health consequences of behaviors). These efforts are conducted primarily by the campus counseling center, though sometimes with support from student affairs personnel; the academic enterprise, however, including the faculty and the curriculum, remains largely uninvolved. This limited approach is insufficient to the complexity of the problem, as Gonzalez explains:

One growing realization in the prevention field, especially on the college campus, is that comprehensive, communitywide approaches are needed. . . . A long-term, systems approach that addresses the relationships among individual and social factors is necessary for effective prevention. (2002, 14)

Similarly, Kuh highlights the importance of an environmental perspective wherein colleges create “small, ‘human-scale’ environments [that] encourage responsible, health-enhancing behavior,” and emphasizes that where faculty and student contact is frequent and classes are small, “a college or university encourages its members to know each other, a precursor to caring for one another” (2002, 59).

This leads to the fundamental question asked by the Bringing Theory to Practice project: does engaged learning constitute one such community-based approach to prevention? In reviewing the literature, no instances were found in which engaged learning was identified

as an explicit means of addressing depression or substance abuse on the college campus. However, the following preliminary evidence, as well as theoretical suggestion, was found for considering engaged learning as a promising approach.

Findings from involvement measures: Astin (1993) reports that elements of engaged learning (e.g., involvement in group projects and interaction with faculty) are correlated with self-report of better emotional health and reduced drinking behaviors. Sax, Bryant, and Gilmartin conclude that students’ engagement in academic experiences is “not unrelated” (2002, 20) to emotional well-being. Wechsler et al. (1995), Jessor et al. (1995), and Fenzel (2005) all describe a correlation between participation in pro-social activities like community service and lower rates of heavy drinking, though it is unclear whether students who are civically inclined are also less predisposed to heavy drinking behaviors. Because these studies are correlational in nature, more research is needed to determine the direction and degree of any causality.

Stress in academic environments: While moderate levels of environmental stress can lead to optimal performance, extreme levels of stress can inhibit learning and result in stress-induced emotional problems, including “fatigue, anxiety, fear, depression, or boredom” (Whitman, Spendlove, and Clark 1986, 10). Fife explains that college faculty largely “set the level of stress to which students are subjected” and often believe that “if a course does not stressfully challenge students completely, then it cannot be wholly worthwhile” (1986, xiii). If compounded across a student’s academic course load, this view can lead to extreme levels of stress and, in turn, students may not only become *dis-engaged* from their learning, but also experience negative effects in terms of their emotional health and well-being.

Engaged learning may provide one means of optimizing the level of stress in the learning environment: as Whitman, Spendlove, and Clark report, students who are “given the opportunity to participate actively in the learning process report less stress than those forced into a more passive or helpless mode” (1986, 20).

Such active engagement provides students with a higher degree of control over their learning, which in turn may moderate stress levels and potentially reduce mental health problems associated with excessive levels of academic stress.

Developmental challenge and support: Rivinus (1992) identifies a host of developmental challenges in college: rapid change in environment and roles; separation/individuation from family; identity crises; establishment of peer networks; and resolution of vocational choice. A developmental perspective holds that these challenges must be balanced with environmental support for optimal growth to occur (Sanford 1966), but Schulenberg et al. assert that the college environment—and society in general—does not provide adequate support and structure for students:

There is far less institutionally- and culturally-imposed structure on the roles, experiences and expectations of young people when they make the transition out of adolescence. . . . the lack of structure creates a developmental mismatch that adversely influences their health and well-being. (1998, 1)

In such a scenario, both depression and substance abuse can be seen as negative consequences of developmental “overchallenge” and lack of environmental counterbalance.

The solution from this perspective would be to restore equilibrium between challenges and environmental support. Schulenberg and Maggs, who claim the “balance between freedoms and responsibilities is crucial,” suggest “slowing down the pace of increased freedoms during the transition” through measures like curfews, as well as increasing students’ “social responsibilities through community work” (2001, 33). Similarly, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation recommends that to reduce substance abuse, campuses require students “to undertake a certain number of hours of volunteer work to reduce their free time and to give their educational experience additional meaning” (1997, 39). The responsibilities conferred on students through such pedagogies may help counter excessive levels of freedom, and therefore opportunity for substance abuse; moreover, engaged learning experiences can

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provide students with significant mentoring relationships (e.g., with faculty, community members) which can counteract depression arising from developmental issues like separation/individuation from family (Mann 1992).

Moral development and personal and social responsibility: There is some evidence that students’ level of moral development is related to sub-

stance abuse and other self-injurious behaviors. Berkowitz (2000), in reporting a correlation between adolescents’ substance use and assessment along Kohlberg’s stages of moral reasoning, claims that the “more mature one’s ability to make these moral decisions, the less likely one is to use such substances” (1984, 40). Additionally, Berkowitz found that adolescents who view substance abuse as a moral issue—rather than an issue of personal choice—are less likely to engage in such abuse.

If substance abuse and self-harm are linked to students’ moral development, it follows that encouraging such development might reduce negative behaviors. For example, while Schrader reports that a majority of moral dilemmas reported by college students involve substance abuse issues, most students address these dilemmas by “doing nothing” or “by going along with the situation or with others in it” (1999, 48). Forms of engaged learning (e.g., service learning and community-based research) might require students to think more complexly about moral dilemmas and their own actions, thereby providing opportunities for students to craft identities as moral individuals responsible both to self and to larger communities.

Conclusions

It is unlikely that engaged learning will constitute a “silver bullet” for either substance abuse or depression, given the complex causes and risk factors for both. However, current prevention literature recommends a shift from targeted interventions toward community-level approaches in addressing students’ mental health concerns. There is enough preliminary evidence—as well as theoretical suggestion—in the literature to consider engaged learning as one such possible approach.



William Paterson
University

Clearly, further research is necessary to test this possibility. Such inquiry must be sufficiently complex in design to account for the multivariate nature of student identity, experience, and behavior, which can both affect study outcomes and constitute a potential source of self-selection bias. Research also must be time-sensitive to account for the normal maturational processes that occur during college and the limited duration of most engaged learning experiences. It must consider the broad impact of the college environment and social contexts on student experience as well. Thus, research that utilizes quantitative and qualitative measures, adequate control or comparison groups, and longitudinal design holds the most promise for exploring the full possibilities of engaged learning. These principles can also be incorporated into existing assessment efforts, whether at the programmatic or institutional level.

In every sense, colleges and universities are experiments in community: multiple constituencies gather around a set of common purposes,

share the same physical and intellectual space, and experience together the consequences—both positive and negative—of each other's actions. It makes sense therefore that the literature calls for a community-level approach to the most important goals and pressing concerns of higher education: engaging students in their learning and in society, and preventing substance abuse and depression, respectively. While many questions remain about the linkages between engaged learning, student mental health and well-being, and civic development, a community perspective is both a starting point for research exploring such questions and a promising means of addressing them in higher education practice. □

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