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Sleepwalking through Undergrad: Using Student Engagement as an Institutional Alarm Clock

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Walking through the halls of my institution during mid September, I see that there are many students on campus. On the surface, the university seems a buzz of activity; there are long line ups at the student center for food, students are outside hanging out with friends, and some students are in lecture halls daydreaming about the moment their classes will end. This buzz can be deceiving. It implies that students are awake, active and alert when in my opinion, they are often not. Students may be physically awake but their disengagement with the learning process, their institution and the opportunities around them can be likened to a state of unconsciousness, of auto pilot, of sleepwalking. It is not necessarily their fault; education is marketed as a means to an end; there is little focus on the journey or the learning process to get there. Thus, it is plausible that students may be simply unaware that they are sleepwalking as they shuffle from one class to the next. I was not so different from these students in the beginning of my undergrad experience.

During my first two years in my undergraduate education, I was unintentionally sleepwalking. I went to class and I took notes but other than that I was uninvolved in any other aspect of university life. It was not until the summer of my third year, when I applied for a work-study position on campus that I started to wake up and my level of involvement dramatically increased. The program I coordinated exposed to me various people and opportunities. I became engaged not only with the learning process but with the institution I was attending and the faculty, staff and students that it was made up of. I woke up. Now as the benefactor of all those experiences, I often wonder, what can institutions do to wake students up? If the problem is not laziness but rather unawareness, or what I term 'sleepwalking' in this paper, what can we use as an institutional alarm clock to wake students up? Literature on student development suggests that student engagement may be a possible answer (Astin, 1999; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Kuh, 2009).

"Student engagement represents the time and effort students devote to activities that are empirically linked to desired outcomes of college and what institutions do to induce students to participate in these activities" (Kuh, 2009, p. 683). This is critical to higher education as institutions are faced with increasing pressure to improve student outcomes such as retention, persistence and completion (Zepke & Leach, 2005; Astin, 1999). This pressure is a response to the public cry for accountability within the higher education system and to ensure the effectiveness of the quality of education (Kuh, 2009). The quality of education can be measured by student engagement as the

more students engage with the institution, the more likely they are to persist and complete their education (Kuh, 2009; Astin 1999). Students are also more likely to have a deeper understanding of their learning and graduate with the critical thinking skills required of the outside world (Chickering & Gamson, 1987). In these ways and more, I feel that student engagement can be used as an institutional alarm clock, waking students from their slumber.

Student engagement also reflects the recurring issue of access. As Tinto (2002) argues, "We have to move beyond thinking of access solely as enabling people to gain entry into higher education to seeing access as providing individuals realistic opportunities to earn a four-year college degree" (Tinto, 2002, p. 1). Insofar as access relates to persistence and retention, student engagement literature provides suggestions for which to increase access for low income and academically unprepared students (Tinto, 2008). As funds are needed to support and evaluate student engagement initiatives, funding, the third recurring issue of post-secondary education is connected to this topic as well.

This paper will examine the following research questions: 1) where does the term student engagement come from and what does it mean?; 2) what variables does it espouse as being critical for student success; 3) what implications do these models have on student engagement initiatives in other words, how can student engagement be used as an institutional alarm clock?; and 4) what recurring themes exist in student engagement literature that suggest ways we can increase engagement? The scope of this paper is limited to the institutional perspective of student engagement and the recurring themes around these four questions. It is not meant as an expansive look at this literature and therefore does not address the student dimension of student engagement. It is also limited to suggestions for practice and does not address surveys used to measure engagement, their validity or their results. The discussions related to the aforementioned questions can be found under the headings of theoretical perspectives (question 1 and 2) and practical implications (question 3 and 4) in the literature review section.

Literature Review

The literature on student engagement is quite expansive and spans several decades, but is written primarily from the American college system perspective. While I sought Canadian sources, I found few that were as detailed as American sources. Thus in an effort to keep my research consistent I have relied on American sources. As the college system in the United States is different from the higher education landscape in Canada, I focused on including content that in my view were applicable to both educational systems.

My methodology for collecting relevant literature on this topic included engaging in conversations with two professors who have done research in this area. They provided me with authors to look into

as well as a few articles that they used in their research. Upon reading these articles, a scan of the references used sent me in search of articles that elaborated on topics I was interested in. The database I used for the majority of my sources was the Education Resources Information Center (ERIC) available through the University of Toronto library portal.

To understand how student engagement can be used as an institutional alarm clock, one must first understand what student engagement is and where it comes from. In the literature, the term student engagement is used in a variety of ways by a variety of authors. Similar terms are also used to explain the same concept. In the next section, I examine Astin's theory of involvement, Tinto's theory of student departure, Pacarella's General Casual Model as well two alternative perspectives.

Theoretical Perspectives: College Impact Models

Student engagement has its roots in student development theories which look at how students learn and develop their identity. College impact models, a subsection of student development theories, emphasize understanding the environmental and sociological origins of change and look specifically within the college context in regards to student development (Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005). It is these models that I will examine to explain the concept of student engagement as it is known today. All three models can be understood from an 'input-process-output' approach. Astin (1984 as cited in Kuh, 2009) built upon the concept of 'time on task' and the 'quality of effort' to propose his theory of student involvement. This theory was proposed in part, because he was frustrated with traditional pedagogical approaches to student development and learning. These traditional pedagogical approaches emphasize what Astin calls a black box approach. That is, when the correct inputs are applied (exposure to the right subject matter, adequate resources or an individualized combination of the two), the desired outcomes are achieved (student learning and development). There is no mediating mechanism (process) to translate the inputs to the outputs, in other words students do not play an active role in this process (Astin, 1999).

Astin's theory of involvement emphasizes the opposite. He argues that students learn by becoming involved with their learning (Astin, 1999; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Kuh, 2009). Student involvement is defined as, "the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience" (Astin, 1999, p. 518). It is not so much what the student feels, but what the student does that will reflect on his or her academic experience. In this way, student involvement has a behavioural component. Astin's theory of involvement (1999) has five main postulates

"1) Involvement refers to the investment of physical and psychological energy in various objects…; 2) Regardless of its objects, involvement occurs along a

continuum: that is, different students manifest different degrees of involvement in a given object, and the same student manifests different degrees of involvement in different objects at different times; 3) Involvement has both quantitative and qualitative features…4) The amount of student learning and personal development associated with any educational program is directly proportional to the quality and quantity of student involvement in that program; 5) the effectiveness of any educational policy or practice is directly related to the capacity of that policy or practice to increase student involvement." (p.519)

In Astin's theory of involvement, inputs are pre-existing student characteristics that students bring with them to college for example, their previous academic and social experiences. Process, also expressed as environment, are the resources, programs, people, culture and policies that students encounter while in college. Output is what students leave college with, examples include, newfound values, beliefs, skills and knowledge (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Tinto builds upon Astin's theory but focuses on student departure as his output. In his theory, students enter the institution with pre-existing student characteristics and varying levels of goal commitment (the commitment to graduate), and institutional commitment (the commitment to stay at the institution). These are Tinto's inputs. Once in the institution, there are two main processes in place, those that lead to academic integration and those that lead to social integration. Dependant upon student experiences with these processes, or as Astin might say, their level of involvement, students revise their initial commitments and make their output decision: to persist or depart. While Tinto's theory is heavily regarded, there seem to be two schools of thought regarding it, those who wish to revise it (as cited in Zepke & Leach, 2005) and those who wish to take the theory in a completely different direction (as cited in Zepke & Leach, 2005). Many aspects of Tinto's theory have been validated by empirical research but the results have not always been consistent (Zepke & Leach, 2005). In a study conducted by Braxton and Lien in 2000 (as cited in Zepke & Leach, 2005) varying levels of support were found for Tinto's academic integration construct in both multi-institutional and single institutional studies. In an earlier empirical study conducted by Braxton, Sullivan and Johnson in 1997 (as cited in Braxton, Milem, Sullivan & Shaw, 2000) support was found for only 5 of Tinto's 13 postulates, 4 of which were all related to students initial and revised commitment decisions. Little support or explanation was found for the element of social integration in Tinto's theory. However, Braxton and associates were able to discover support for similar concepts in other theories (as cited in Braxton et al, 2000).

While Tinto's model focused on institutional characteristics that were within the institution, academic integration and social integration, Pascarella recognized that the structural organization of the institution

and the institutional environment also play a role in shaping the learning and cognitive development of students. He also explicitly integrated Astin's concept of involvement in his 'quality of student effort' variable. In Pascarella's General Causal Model, growth is defined as "a function of direct and indirect effects of five sets of variables" (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p. 56). The five sets of variables are respectively: 1) students' background characteristics; 2) the institution's organization and structure; 3) the institutional environment; 4) interactions with agents of socialization and 5) the quality of student effort. Students' background characteristics and the institution's organization and structure interact to produce the institutional environment and these three variables interact to influence student interactions with agents of socialization. Quality of effort, the last set of variables, is influenced by student characteristics, the institutional environment and interactions with agents of socialization. Set one, four and five combine to produce the student's overall learning and cognitive development (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). This model uses set one and two as its input variables, set three, four and five as it's process variables and the learning and cognitive development as its outcome variable.

The three models listed above have an assimilationist view; they are built on the assumption that students should adapt to institutional structures, environments etc. to be successful. An emerging discourse suggests that this perspective may not be appropriate in the changing context of education and that institutions should adapt to fit students instead (Zepke & Leach, 2005). McKenzie and Schweitzer (as cited by Zepke & Leach, 2005) find that, "students who indicated high levels of integration tended to have lower grade point averages" (p. 52). This suggests that integration may not be the key to the student retention puzzle as previously thought. Tierney (as cited by Zepke & Leach, 2005) echoes the need for a change when he says,

> Rather than a model that assumes that students must fit into what is often an alien culture and that they leave their own cultures, I argue the opposite. The challenge is to develop ways in which an individual's theory is affirmed, honoured and incorporated into the organization's culture. (p. 52)

In my opinion, this emerging discourse reflects the underlying trend of the commoditization of education. As education is increasingly marketed as a commodity that the institution sells and the student purchases, there is the expectation that the institution will adapt to fit student needs. It is as if it is a buyer's market and students feel that they have a right to demand what they want because they are paying for their education. Whether or not this should be the case or not may be irrelevant as the culture of education is changing and institutions must change along with it to keep up. It is interesting to note that McKenzie and Schweitzer's finding regarding highly integrated students may not be so different from what Astin himself found in his longitudinal study of departure. Astin (1999) discusses

how over involvement in the social sphere or athletics department can lead to a decline in the academic department, or in the academic integration of students. Alternatively, over involvement in the academic sphere can lead to a decline in the social integration sphere. High achieving students are often isolated from their peers which can affect their undergraduate experience (Astin, 1999). When the only outcomes measured are academic ones, it is difficult to see where the effects are and what their actual implications may be. As I was unable to locate the study myself to see what variables were looked into, I cannot say for certain what the implications of McKenzie and Schweitzer findings actually are. I can only draw a conclusion based on what Zepke & Leach, 2005 cite and imply. At the same time, my personal experience is that students are more likely to be engaged if they see the relevance of what they are learning. Academic integration may not be enough as it may not induce the active participation needed for involvement. Modifying the institution to fit student needs may be the answer to getting more students involved.

Case (2008) offers an alternate approach to student learning by focusing on the impact of alienation. Her framework, based on Mann's (as cited by Case, 2008) work categorizes student learning experiences into three categories. These are based on students' reasons for participating in higher education. Here again, we see the use of Astin's theory of involvement. Her three categories are the alienation associated with entering the higher education community, fitting into the higher education community and staying in the higher education community. In my opinion, these could alternatively be thought of as access, integration/adaptation and persistence. She suggests that to understand student experiences with learning, we need to "consider the reasons why students are choosing to participate in our programmes, the experiences they have had of trying to gain access to this new community and their experiences of assessment as they try to succeed in the system" (Case, 2008, p. 10).

This alternative view differs from the views mentioned above as it focuses on students' varying levels of alienation from the institution, the people around them and the environment as the root of students' learning experiences. It also offers insight into the pre-higher education experience, a factor that is often disregarded as the focus primarily remains on persistence. By examining the categories that Case (2008) mentions, she feels that we will discover ways in which to better teach our students, which services we offer and how and when to offer them and lastly how institutions can adapt to fit student needs. While the approach differs in its focus, the underlying theme of involvement or lack thereof can be seen as similar to the notion of alienation. That is, students who feel alienated are those who are completely uninvolved or disengaged. It is also similar to Tinto's notion of integration as fitting into the higher education system would reflect social integration and views of assessment could be similar to academic integration. Pascarella's notion of the institutional environment is implied, while not explicitly stated in Case's theory.

The preceding section highlighted the various models of student engagement that exist. While they differ in their focus, many of their underlying themes are the same. Most commonly reflected are Astin's theory of involvement and Tinto's ideas of academic and social integration. While Zepke and Leach (2005) argue that recent literature points to adaptation instead of integration, the reasons to do so and how to do so require further investigation. Case's (2008) model of alienation offers insight into how students may feel alienated from the onset and the need to examine the reasons why students enter higher education. This could be loosely related to Tinto's concepts of goal and institutional commitment. In the following section, the practical implications of these models are discussed by focusing primarily on initiatives institutions can put into practice to help increase student engagement.

Practical Implications: Suggestions for Practice

While there are recurring themes in the literature with relation to suggestions to increase levels of student engagement, the impact of these suggestions vary from institution to institution. This is because different institutions deliver the same program in different ways and use different terminology to express similar concepts (Kezar & Kinzie, 2006; Learning Reconsidered, 2004). With that said, the following is meant to provide an overview of a few of the recurring themes in the literature that suggest initiatives, activities and ways to think of learning that have led to increased levels of student engagement.

Learning Reconsidered (2004) suggests that the members of an institution need to work together to identify which student outcomes are desirable for their institution and how they propose to create conditions to accomplish those goals. They offer seven broad student learning outcomes as guidance, these are: cognitive complexity; knowledge acquisition, integration and application; humanitarianism; civic engagement; interpersonal and intrapersonal competence; practical competence; persistence and academic achievement. Using these broad student outcomes, institutions must have a clear direction on how to achieve these outcomes and what these outcomes entail before implementing activities and initiatives targeted around student engagement. Kezar and Kinzie (2006) find that an institution's mission can have an impact on creating engaging environments for students. In their study, they found empirical evidence that suggests that an individualized, distinctive mission of a campus has a larger impact on student engagement strategies and success than a broad-based one that is linked only to type of institution (Kezar & Kinzie, 2006). This helps to create a culture that values students and their success.

One predominant theme in student engagement literature is the importance and benefits of student faculty interaction. In Astin's (1987, as cited in Astin, 1999) longitudinal study of student retention, he found that "frequent interaction with faculty is more strongly related to satisfaction with college than any other type of involvement or, indeed, any other student or institutional characteristic" (p. 525). In

fact, interaction with faculty was seen to have a ripple effect on students as it positively influenced their satisfaction with other aspects of institutional life as well. A similar sentiment is critical to Chickering and Gamson's (1987) seven principles of good practice in undergraduate education where practices that encourage contact between student and faculty are listed as number one. Other good practices that are highlighted are to "…develop reciprocity and cooperation among students; use active learning techniques; give prompt feedback; emphasize time on task; communicate high expectations; and respect diverse talents and ways of learning" (p. 2). Each principle is effective but when used together, they have a multiplicative effect, employing six powerful forces in education: activity, cooperation, diversity, expectation, interaction and responsibility (Chickering & Gamson, 1987).

Faculty interaction may matter in more ways than one. Research shows that positive faculty opinions about various programs can increase the likelihood that students will participate in them. Consider the following example: in institutions where professors said that learning communities were only somewhat important, only 3% of first year students participated in them. Contrast this with institutions where professors said that learning communities were very important and the participation level amongst first year students jumps up to 55% (Kuh, 2009).

This may link back to notion of student time as a finite resource mentioned by Astin. Astin recognized that student time is a finite resource and that administrators are competing for student time with other forces in student lives (Astin, 1999). Therefore, I would argue that when students are making the decision of whether or not to participate in an activity, they first ask themselves whether the activity will be worthwhile. When faculty members place emphasis on these activities as being important, it likely sends the message to students that the activity will be worthwhile, hence increasing the likelihood of student participation.

In my experience, increasing student participation in activities has consistently been a challenge for administrators. According to Learning Reconsidered (2004), this may be because, "on many campuses, students may perceive little coherence in the student affairs curriculum, and individual episodes of acquiring knowledge fragments (such a resume writing...), or developmental experiences like leadership in student organizations or volunteer service simply orbit the student's world with little sense of their relationships to one another or to academic courses" (p. 8). When developmental opportunities are seen as additional and separate to the learning environment and student lives, students have little reason to take advantage of them.

Learning Reconsidered (2004) argues that the education system needs to switch from focusing on information transfer to identity development. In its introduction it says,

> Learning Reconsidered is an argument for the integrated use of all of higher education's resources in the education and preparation of the whole student. It is also an introduction to new ways of understanding and supporting learning and development as intertwined, inseparable elements of the student experience. It advocates for transformative education – a holistic process of learning that places the student at the center of the learning experience. (p.1)

Transformative education occurs when the information learned modifies the way students view the world, otherwise known as their frame of reference. For this to occur, the authors argue that faculty and staff must consider what students already know, what their values and behaviours are and how they want to contribute to the world (Learning Reconsidered, 2004). In a sense this is found in Astin, Tinto's and Pascarella's college impact models as they recognize that students bring characteristics with them when they enter the institution. However, transformative learning goes one step further by emphasizing that students need to make meaning out of what they are learning. This happens through students reflecting on events to comprehend their significance and relationship to their lives and the world around them. Therefore, within the classroom, faculty should engage students in their learning by asking them to volunteer their perspectives, personal experiences and their opinions on the consequences of what they are learning (Learning Reconsidered, 2004). However, Bowen (2005) notes that students may resist transformative learning because it threatens their pre-existing identity and worldview. This notion was supported by a study done in an elite liberal arts college where it was discovered that students feel the purpose of discussion is to defend and convince others of their pre-existing views and therefore only wish to engage in discussion if they have strongly held beliefs about the topic (Bowen, 2005). This is something that faculty must be aware of when using discussion as a learning tool.

AC&U's LEAP project (as cited by Kuh, 2009) suggests that there are ten potentially 'high impact practices' that invest student time and effort into productive activities which are likely to deepen learning. These include, "…first year seminars, learning communities, writing-intensive courses, common intellectual experiences, service learning, diversity experiences, student-faculty research, studying abroad, internships and other field placements, and senior capstone experiences" (Kuh, 2009, pp. 688-689). The use of learning communities to increase student engagement is a recurring theme within the literature (Tinto, 2002, 2008; Zhao & Kuh as cited in Porter, 2006 and in Kuh, 2009; Learning Reconsidered, 2004). Learning communities, as defined by Zhao and Kuh (as cited in Kuh, 2009) are "some formal program where groups of students take two or more classes together" (p. 689). Studies have shown that learning communities serve as a way of making large universities more intimate, especially if they increase the levels of student-faculty

interaction by having a denser faculty population than student population (Porter, 2006).

Engstrom & Tinto (2008) highlight the considerable gains learning communities can make on academically unprepared students. In their 2008 study, they discovered that academically underprepared students who were in learning communities were significantly more engaged in both classroom activities related to faculty and peers as well as activities outside of class than their underprepared counterparts. These students were encouraged to take ownership of their learning and see themselves and their peers as potential sources of knowledge. They reported intellectual, emotional and developmental gains and were more likely to persist in college when compared to their counterparts. Engstrom & Tinto (2008) stress that it is not enough for institutions to simply have a learning community in place, the learning community itself requires that faculty and staff change the way they perceive learning and teach. Staff and faculty must work together to develop safe environments for students to connect not only to each other but to faculty and support staff/services as well. For learning communities to be successful, institutions must take ownership over creating environmental conditions that are conducive to success. They must believe that any student can be successful if the right conditions exist and show students that they actually care about their success (Tinto, 2008).

Another recurring theme in student engagement literature is the need for training and for institutions to take issues of student persistence and learning seriously. Tinto (2002) argues that for student persistence and learning to be taken seriously, it must be made a priority and its policies placed at the center of institutional life instead of at the periphery. It is not enough to create a policy to address student persistence if that policy is unrelated to the overall mission, goals and values of the institution. Policies must be centralized and integrated if change is to occur. He also suggests that faculty should be trained and all those responsible for student persistence and learning should be held accountable. Learning Reconsidered (2004) agrees and emphasizes the importance of initial training and ongoing training for student affairs professionals

> The bottom line is that student affairs preparation must be broad based, interdisciplinary, grounded in theory, and designed to prepare forward-thinking, confident, and competent educators who will see the big picture and work effectively with other institutional agents to ensure that colleges and universities become learning communities in which students develop the skills they need to enter the rapidly changing world in which we now live. (Learning Reconsidered, 2004, p. 32)

In conclusion, there are five broad recurring themes in student engagement literature in terms of what institutions can do to increase student engagement. The first theme emphasizes the importance of

mission and knowing which student outcomes are desired for the institution and how institutions will create conditions to help achieve them. The second discusses the importance and benefits of faculty interaction as not only does it increase levels of engagement but it is also helpful in increasing overall participation in student engagement initiatives. The third theme argues for a shift from education focusing on information transfer to focusing on identity development. This theme advocates for transformative learning where students are placed at the center of the institutional experience and resources are used to fulfill student outcomes in an integrative way. Faculty can engage students by asking for the opinions, values and beliefs regarding course content and encourage students to create meaning from their experience by actively reflecting. The fourth theme looks at two high impact activities and focuses on the use of learning communities to help academically underprepared students. Suggestions are offered on what institutions must keep in mind when trying to develop learning communities so that their efforts are effective. Lastly, the fifth theme emphasizes the importance of training and ongoing skill development for both staff and faculty so that they are able to help students develop the skills they need to be successful in the outside world.

Discussion

My journey into the field of student engagement began with the hope that student engagement may provide an institutional alarm clock to wake students who are sleepwalking through their undergraduate education. I was surprised to discover that student engagement theories and models have been around a long time. It amazes me that with all the research that exists, traditional paradigms that rely on exposing students to the 'right' subject matter are still emphasized in most undergraduate classrooms. Resource theory which looks at providing adequate resources leading to desired student outcomes are still in the minds of many student affairs professionals. Before venturing on this journey, I thought my feelings were unique, I am happily surprised to discover that they are not and disappointed that while this literature exists, there seems to be few steps taken to integrate any of these theories into the every day functioning of institutional life.

Reading Astin's theory of involvement, I could relate to his theory. At my institution, I'm the coordinator of a supplemental instruction program which relies on this very sentiment. It provides peer assisted study sessions for courses that are historically difficult and emphasize engaging with learning and actively solving problems with others. One of Astin's postulates emphasizes that involvement has quantitative and qualitative measures. In my experience, this is very true as it is not always how much one studies (quantity) but rather how one studies (quality) that makes the difference. This is especially the case in student affairs because I think the problem is not only that students do not spend enough time studying, it is that they do not know how to study effectively. I'll touch upon this when I

mention how student engagement connects to the triad in higher education.

Tinto's theory of student departure emphasizes academic and social integration. Zepke and Leach argue that instead of focusing on students integrating into the institutional environment, institutions should focus on adapting themselves to fit student needs. I feel that a middle ground is best. Students need to be integrated into the institution as they must familiarize themselves with the policies and procedures in the institutional environment. However, institutions should be willing to adapt in certain situations. I suppose my fear with an adaptation approach is that it may be taken too far. Recently, my supervisor told me a story of how sixteen students stood up in the middle of an exam and refused to write it. Their complaint was that the professor had indicated that the exam would be multiple choice, short answer and full answer and there were no multiple choice questions on the exam. The students were told they could either choose to write the exam or petition. The students chose to petition and failed the course. They then complained that the process was not fair. When I heard this story, I was appalled at the attitudes of students. They felt that since there were so many of them that they would not fail the course; they were wrong. The idea that they assumed the institution would bend to fit them is shocking to me. However, I have noticed that there is a growing sense of entitlement among youth nowadays, and my worry is that if institutions are too willing to adapt to their needs, that this sense of entitlement will only get even worse. The commodification of education has aided in this mentality and hence I would warn institutions to take caution with this approach.

Pascarella's General Causal Model introduced the impact of institutional environment and the structure of the institution itself. To me, the greatest value in Pascarella's model is that it is continuous and integrated. The variables interact with each other to produce another set of variables, which in term interact to produce different outcomes. I feel this is reflective of my experience in higher education; as things have changed, so have I.

Case's model of alienation presented an interesting way for me to look at student engagement as it emphasized the alienation students may feel when entering the institution. This is reflected in many first year experiences when students complain about feeling more like a number than a person.

The implications for practice mentioned in my paper emphasize the importance of institutions having a clear direction and a mission to guide their student engagement efforts. While I agree with this notion, my worry is that many institutions say they value various things, but in actuality, their policies and procedures do not reflect this value. It is not enough for institutions to center their mission statement around student success, if the funds are not made available to make student success a priority. If the members of institutions are to be on the same page, then they must collaborate with each other to determine what

outcomes are desirable. As ideal as this would be, in my experience, it seldom happens. Institutional departments often operate in their own silos and may not even share what they are doing with each other, much less meet to discuss what they feel institutions should be aiming towards. This may be further complicated by the large level of bureaucracy that exists in institutions that makes change very difficult. Therefore, I agree with the intention behind this message but I worry about the feasibility of putting it into practice.

Similarly, transformative learning in theory is a great developmental tool for students. I think for it to be effective, it must have institution-wide support. The challenge with focusing on transformative learning and with training faculty is that faculty members may resist change. At my institution, there is a movement towards creating learning communities and various other student engagement initiatives. When brought up during faculty council, faculty members were concerned about what this would mean for their jobs and who had the right to tell them how to teach. Suggesting that faculty require training as suggested by Engstrom & Tinto (2008) and Learning Reconsidered (2004) would probably cause an uproar. The leadership for such initiatives must come from the top and be based on a collaborative effort from the major players in the institution. It must be communicated properly and be integrated into the culture of the institution. Another challenge with learning communities is that many institutions are commuter schools, York, U of T and Ryerson are but a few examples. If the school is primarily filled with commuter students then what impact will this have on how learning communities are developed and implemented? This may be an interesting area for follow up research. Also, a look at Canadian literature and the impact of NSSE on both the student engagement construct and its measurement are areas for follow up research. They also represent two of the key limitations in this paper.

Despite my cautionary view, I remain optimistic about the possibility of creating learning communities on campus and the ideas behind transformative learning. When I mentioned using student engagement as an institutional alarm clock, it is initiatives like these, if done correctly, that will do the trick. This is because both of these initiatives change the culture of the institution by placing student engagement and extracurricular activities in the center of the student experience instead of in the periphery. This sends the message to students that engagement is not a secondary, additional piece but rather a part of the integrated whole that is the student experience. These initiatives leave me with much hope.

Conclusion

Student engagement links to access, quality and funding in numerous ways. As student engagement helps to increase retention, persistence and completion of postsecondary education, its efforts help increase the quality of education received. As Engstrom & Tinto (2008) point out, access without support is not opportunity and low-

income and underprepared students often end up leaving the
institution. As student engagement helps to increase persistence, it
links to access as well. Finally, student engagement links to funding
because it is costly to implement student engagement initiatives.
Without adequate funding and institutional support, student
engagement initiatives will not become a dominant part of the
landscape of higher education. There is a need for leadership within
higher education to realize that our students are sleepwalking through
their education and if we do not take steps now, they will have a rude
awakening when they enter the "real" world.

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