INTRODUCTION

Exploring the Connection between High-Impact Practices and Student Success

While educators are scrambling to increase retention and graduation rates to meet the goals of the completion agenda, there is increasing evidence about what works to improve students’ learning and success. Much is known about the advantages of providing engaged learning experiences (often referred to as “high-impact practices”) for students. A cursory scan of campus websites will provide at least one, if not multiple, highlights of these practices: students giving back to the community, students engaging with faculty, students working collaboratively, students engaging in field research, students studying abroad. But when it comes to student success and learning, what exactly is the payoff for this engagement? And for whom?

The publications *High-Impact Educational Practices: What They Are, Who Has Access to Them, and Why They Matter* and *Ensuring Quality & Taking High-Impact Practices to Scale* helped establish the efficacy of high-impact practices using nationwide data from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE).¹ Though such practices have long existed on campuses and are familiar to scholars and practitioners alike, with *High-Impact Educational Practices*, author George Kuh provided at least two important insights. First, he offered evidence suggesting that by treating these practices as a set of effective tools rather than as discrete experiences, faculty, administrators, and other campus professionals could begin to conceptualize the collective impact these practices have on indicators of student success and learning. Second, he unveiled the need to consider the relationship between participation in high-impact practices and underserved student success.

In recent years, the nationwide postsecondary completion rate has largely stagnated. Between 1998 and 2008, the average six-year college completion rate in the United States increased by only 3 percentage points, to 55.9 percent.² Moreover, graduation rates vary significantly by race and socioeconomic background, and gaps between students from groups that have been historically underserved by higher education and their peers from traditionally advantaged groups are further determined by institutional selectivity. For example, the graduation gap

---


focusing white over Hispanic students is 12 percentage points overall, but it expands to 21 percentage points at highly selective research universities.¹

*High-Impact Educational Practices* provided insight into the role of high-impact practices in ameliorating these gaps. Specifically, it showed compellingly that while both white students and black and Hispanic students who participate in “educationally purposeful activities” (a proxy for high-impact practices or engaged learning experiences) show improvements, black students’ gains in first-to-second-year retention rates and Hispanic students’ gains in first-year grade point averages (GPAs) are greater than those of white students. These findings, referred to in that publication as a “compensatory effect,” suggest the possibility that high-impact practices, while good for all students, might be particularly beneficial for underserved students. ² A subsequent literature review examining the research on a select group of high-impact practices (first-year seminars, learning communities, service learning, undergraduate research, and capstone experiences) provided additional support for this hypothesis.³

As interest in promoting high-impact practices has grown—along with the need to foster and sustain student access and success—three critical gaps in the existing research have emerged. First, there is scant evidence about the relationship between underserved students’ learning and their engagement in high-impact practices. Second, while *High-Impact Educational Practices* showed that Hispanic and black students who engage in high-impact practices demonstrate greater gains in their first-year GPAs and a higher probability of first-to-second-year retention, respectively, than their white peers, little is known about whether engagement in these practices differentially affects learning outcomes for these and other traditionally underserved students. Finally, what is known about the nature of student experiences with high-impact practices comes almost entirely from surveys, which often fail to reflect the rich detail that is present when students articulate, in their own voices, what these experiences mean to them in the context of their lives, their learning, and their hopes for obtaining a degree.

With generous funding from the TG Philanthropy Program,⁴ the mixed-methods study presented in this publication aims to fill the aforementioned gaps and advance current understanding of the relationship between high-impact practices and underserved students’ success and learning. Part I takes a quantitative approach, analyzing NSSE data from a selected group of public universities in order to examine the relationship between cumulative participation in high-impact practices and students’ perceptions of their own learning, for underserved students as compared to their traditionally advantaged peers. Part II complements this quantitative research with a qualitative analysis focused on student experiences articulated in students’ own words. Drawing from fifteen focus groups conducted on nine campuses with nearly one hundred underserved students

**Notes**


⁴ “Created by the Texas Legislature in 1979, TG is a public, nonprofit corporation that promotes educational access and success so that students can realize their college and career dreams. TG offers resources to help students and families plan and prepare for college, learn the basics of money management, and repay their federal student loans. In addition, TG administers Federal Family Education Loan Program (FFELP) loans made before July 1, 2010, on behalf of the U.S. Department of Education.” TG, “Corporate Overview,” accessed April 25, 2013, http://www.tgdc.org/abouttg/overview/.
(defined here as underrepresented minority, first-generation, transfer, and low-income students), it further explicates how these students connect their learning to their engagement in high-impact practices.\(^7\)

In combining quantitative and qualitative approaches, our goal is not only to increase higher education’s understanding of the topic in question, but also to provide an inquiry-based methodological model for campus practitioners to use as they pursue this work on their own. We thus frame each section of the report with guiding questions to help campus practitioners identify the evidence they would need to address the challenges of disaggregating data, gathering meaningful evidence, and using that evidence to generate more targeted questions—and, hopefully, more effective plans for improvement. In the report’s conclusion, we provide a set of recommendations for advancing this work on campuses. We see these recommendations as launchpads for the next phase of an ongoing exploration of high-impact practices and student success and learning. Though we hope that campuses can easily replicate our methodology, we also hope practitioners will note the limitations of our research and ultimately improve on our efforts.

To encourage campus practitioners to engage in a more in-depth analysis of high-impact practices, we invited our colleagues from the Center for Urban Education (CUE) at the University of Southern California to develop a toolkit for assessing individual high-impact practices based on the Equity Scorecard™.\(^8\) The toolkit, included in appendix A, provides a framework campus leaders can use to examine individual high-impact practices from an “equity-minded” perspective based on who participates in these practices, who has access to them, and what impact participation has on identified outcomes. This toolkit helps practitioners examine institutional approaches so that all students can benefit from high-impact practices.

We hope that educators will find all the approaches included in this publication useful as they strive to deepen their understanding of high-impact practices on their campuses and to promote student success and engagement in the learning experience.

---

\(^7\) We include transfer students as an underserved group due to the expectation that institutions would concentrate high-impact practices within the first one or two years, limiting transfer students’ access to such experiences.

\(^8\) As described on the CUE website, “The Equity Scorecard™ is both a process and a data tool. As a process, it combines a theoretical framework with practical strategies to initiate institutional change that will lead to equitable outcomes for students of color. What’s unique about it is the engagement of individuals from different departments and divisions as a team in investigating campus data, practices and policies.” Center for Urban Education, “The Equity Scorecard,” accessed March 14, 2013, http://cue.usc.edu/our_tools/the_equity_scorecard.html.