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Getting involved:

A Typology of Student Cocurricular Participation at a Christian University

by Dr. John L. Hoffman

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Introduction

This study made use of a developmental transcript that tracks student involvement in over 175 student services and cocurricular activities at a Christian university. The researcher employed exploratory factor analysis to develop a typology of student involvement from 201 developmental transcripts. The results identified two involvement factors—collegiate involvement and leadership involvement—and one non-involvement factor. The non-involvement factor was unique in that the activities associated with it were uniquely religious in nature. Implications for practice are discussed.

Whether one uses the language of “integration” (Tinto, 1993), “involvement” (Astin, 1984), or “engagement” (Kuh, 2001), how students actively participate in their learning experience during college is vitally important. The literature addressing student involvement is comprehensive and has carefully considered the influence of characteristics such as gender, race, ability, socioeconomic status, parental education, etc. What the literature has not yet addressed is the influence of religious affiliation. Equally absent within Christian higher education is an analysis of the relationship between denomination or religious tradition with involvement for students attending Christian colleges and universities. The purpose of this study was to investigate differences in how various cohorts of students are involved at a Christian campus. The researcher gave special attention to denominational, gender, and racial differences during the investigation.

Literature Review Involvement Typology

Over the years, many researchers have developed typologies of college students using involvement as their differentiating criteria (Astin, 1993b; Clark & Trow, 1966; Horowitz, 1987; Katchadourian & Boli, 1985; Kuh, Hu, & Vesper, 2000; Tabor & Hackman, 1976). Of these, the typology developed by Kuh, Hu, and Vesper (2000) is the most comprehensive. Their typology is based on a sample of 51,155 students attending 128 colleges and universities between 1990 and 1997. The resulting typology divides students into ten involvement clusters ranging from “intellectuals” to “artists” to the “disengaged.” Interestingly, race and ethnicity were not found to be major distinguishing factors between the various clusters, but other factors such as gender or declared major did distinguish groups.

Characteristics Influencing Involvement

Race. Most of the comparative research addressing racial differences in cocurricular involvement compares Black and White cohorts attending Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs). The consensus of these studies suggests that Black students are more involved at HBCUs and experience greater social isolation and alienation at PWIs (Allen, 1987; DeSousa & Kuh, 1996; Loo & Rolison, 1986; Wagener & Nettles, 1998). Allen (1987), for example, reported that 67% of Blacks attending HBCUs reported feeling somewhat or considerably a part of campus life; only 26% of Blacks attending PWIs reported the same. Further, nearly one in five Blacks at PWIs reported the lowest level of involvement as compared with just one in ten at HBCUs. Most studies since have mirrored these results. One notable exception was a study by MacKay and Kuh (1994) that reported no differences in the levels of involvement between Black and White students. It should be noted, however, that the sample for this study was taken from colleges and universities identified as “involving colleges” due to high overall levels of student cocurricular activity.

One additional difference is worthy of note. Loo and Rolison (1986) found that White students at a large PWI felt that ethnic “clustering,” the tendency for students of color to live in a certain set of residence halls, was a form of “racial segregation” and an inhibitor to interracial involvement. Regarding the same phenomenon, students of color reported that the higher representation of students of color in certain residence halls provided “cultural support within a larger unsupportive system” (p. 72). Research by Watson and Siler (1984) has shown that Black students attending PWIs who receive the highest level of support from other Black students are more apt to interact with White students.

Gender. Though most quantitative studies of student involvement include gender as a variable, few have found significant differences between men and women after controlling for other inputs. One notable exception is an older longitudinal study conducted by Chapman and Pascarella (1983). The researchers conducted multiple group discriminant analysis on a sample of 2,410 students to determine the characteristics of students most likely to be involved in social and academic integration activities. They found that men were more likely to be involved in cocurricular activities while women were more likely to date and to be involved in academic or social conversations with their peers.

Religion. Though a number of researchers and theorists have suggested greater consideration for the role of religion in understanding student involvement (Astin, 1993a, Hoffman, 2002; Saggio, 2003; Schlosser & Sedlacek, 2003), few studies have actually included religion variables, none of which are typological in nature.

Methodology

Setting. This study was conducted with students attending Concordia University, Irvine between the years of 1997 and 2001. Concordia University is a Lutheran University that is owned and operated by the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS). All full-time faculty members are required to be members of the LCMS. Of the 764 full-time students enrolled in 1997, 46.9% were Lutheran. After Lutheran, the largest denominational cohorts of students on campus were non-denominational

(15.1%) and Roman Catholic (11.9%). 75.8% of full-time students in 1997 were White, with the largest two racial minorities being Asian-Pacific Islander (8.9%) and Latino (7.9%).

Data collection. During the period from which data were collected, Concordia University formally tracked student involvement in over 175 student services and cocurricular activities through a developmental transcript. The developmental transcript used at Concordia was modeled after transcripts developed and used at the University of San Diego (Cosgrove, 1986; Cosgrove & Marino, 1997). At the end of each semester, students met with staff advisors to register for classes and report involvement in cocurricular activities. This involvement record was then entered into a database by staff in the advising office. The database linked involvement with services and activities to the seven developmental vectors posited by Chickering (1969; also Chickering & Reisser, 1993). The researcher used the transcripts of the 201 students who completed developmental transcripts during at least two consecutive years between 1997 and 2001. This represents 27.9% of the 721 full-time students who attended Concordia for at least two consecutive years during this time period. The demographic characteristics of the sample were highly similar to those of the entire student body with the one exception of under-representing transfers. Whereas many transfer students did elect to complete developmental transcripts, two years of consecutive developmental transcript data were available for a smaller percentage of transfers (11.2% of the sample as compared to 31.8% of the student population) than for students who began as freshmen at Concordia (88.8% of the sample as compared to 68.2% of the student population).

Analysis. The researcher conducted exploratory factor analysis (EFA) of the developmental transcript data to identify involvement factors representing patterns of student involvement. EFA is used “to determine the number of continuous latent variables [factors] that are needed to explain the correlations among a set of observed variables [involvement in activities and services]” (Muthen & Muthen, 1999, p. 133). Since the intention was to identify several factors and not simply a single generalizable involvement factor, Varimax orthogonal rotations were used to maximize the variances of the factors and accomplish a more even distribution of eigenvalues. An eigenvalue is the sum of the squared loadings of factor indicators that load on a potential factor and is used to test the percentage of variance explained by the factor. In other words, eigenvalues assume the existence of an abstract factor (e.g. involvement) and measure the degree to which indicators (e.g. activities) predict the existence and magnitude of that factor.

Whereas statistical tools can determine the best number of factors for a given set of data, these statistical determinations are best understood as a theoretical guideline, not a strict rule. Pedhazur and Schmelkin (1991) note that such criteria are “potentially harmful because they appear to relieve the researcher of the responsibility of making what is in many instances a complex decision, which should be made primarily on the basis of substantive considerations” (pp. 594-595). With this in mind, the researcher used multiple criteria to determine the best number of factors. First, the researcher employed the general practice of disregarding factors with eigenvalues less than one because they explain a low percentage of the potential factor’s variance. The second guideline used by the researcher was the “scree test” (Cattell, 1966). The scree test

searches for a clear break between large and small eigenvalues. Finally, the researcher reviewed the sets of activities that loaded on a given factor to ensure that the grouping had high face validity. The researcher here employed the common practice of only considering activities with factor loadings with beta weights of .30 or greater.

After identifying a final list of factors, the researcher analyzed the factors using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). The researcher included ten background characteristics as variables in the CFA model to determine the degree to which these were associated with the various factors. The ten background variables were: 1) race, 2) denomination, 3) gender, 4) family income, 5) average hours worked per week, 6) receipt of financial aid, 7) high school grade point average (GPA), 8) scores on standardized entrances exams (ACT and SAT), 9) residence (commuter or in the residence halls), and 10) entry as a freshman or a transfer.

Results

Table 1 reviews the results of the EFA. Five potential factors met the initial unity criterion—having eigenvalues of at least 1.0. Of these, four were patterns of involvement and one was a pattern of non-involvement. Utilizing the scree test, the researcher identified the largest eigenvalue break as being between the third and fourth factors, and limited the set of involvement factors to three. Table 2 reviews the final three factors and the activities that loaded on each with beta weights of at least .30. Table 3 reviews results from the CFA for the entire model.

Table 1

EFA Results

Factor	Eigenvalue	Percentage of Variance	Cumulative Percentage
Factor 1	4.7	9.8	9.8
Factor 2	3.3	6.9	16.7
Factor 3	3.1	6.9	23.2
Factor 4	1.4	2.9	26.1
Factor 5	1.4	2.8	28.9

Table 2
Factor Loadings

Collegiate		Leadership		Religious Outsider	
Activity	Loading	Activity	Loading	Activity	Loading
Judicial Committee	.56	Student Life Board	.57	Beach Ministry	-.57
Student Senate	.53	Orientation Counselor	.39	Bon Fire Devotions	-.50
Battle of the Classes	.53	Career Center Night	.37	Outreach	-.49
Gym Night		Gym Night	.36	Missions Unstoppable	-.47
Homecoming Week	.41	Intramural Team Captain	.35	Tijuana Mission Days	-.46
Homecoming Banquet	.41	Closing Banquet	.34	Inreach	-.43
Freaky Fridays	.38	Executive Board	.32	Chapel	-.43
Family Weekend	.36	Convocation Committee	.32	AWOL Bible Study	-.41
KAOS	.36	Magic Johnson Theatre	.31	Plays	-.39
Student Activities Committee	.34	Student Activities Coordinator	.30	Special Worship Services	-.38
Intercollegiate Games	.31			Convalescent Home Visit	-.35
Manic Mondays	.30			Concerts	-.34
Door Decorating	.30			Youth Ministry Teams	-.32

Table 3
CFA Results

Characteristic	Collegiate	Leadership	Religious Outsider
Race			-.13
Denomination			-.19
Gender	-.14		-.11
Family Income			
Hours Worked			
Financial Aid			
High School GPA			
Test Scores (e.g. SAT)			-.16
Residence	.32	.14	-.23
Freshman/Transfer Entry	.17	.18	

Note: All values are beta weights, $p > .05$

Collegiate

This factor was comprised of involvement in 22 activities with loadings ranging from .30 to .61. The activities were highly similar to those expected of Clark and Trow's (1966) "collegiate" orientation, of Horowitz's (1987) "college man," or of Kuh, Hu, and Vesper's (2000) "collegiate" factor. The activities that loaded on this factor are characterized by high levels of social interaction or involvement with school spirit. Noticeably absent from this lister were academically focused activities, religious and cultural programming, and community service activities. Forty-one students (20.4% of the sample) reported involvement one-half standard deviation higher than the mean on activities associated with the collegiate factor. In terms of descriptive statistics, this group was quite similar to the sample as a whole with two exceptions: students of color were slightly underrepresented (17.1% of collegiates as compared to 22.3% of the sample) and commuting students were significantly under-represented (4.9% of collegiates as compared to 23.9% of the sample).

In the CFA analysis, the ten background variables explained 19.2% of the variance for the collegiate factor. Living in the residence halls was by far the strongest predictor of collegiate involvement (.32). Closer analysis revealed that living in the residence halls was a stronger predictor of collegiate involvement for non-Lutherans and students of color than for Lutherans and White students respectively. Entering Concordia as one's first college was a only predictor of collegiate involvement for students of color. Receiving financial aid had a slight, statistically significant influence on collegiate involvement for non-Lutheran students.

Leadership

Tabor and Hackman (1976) and Astin (1993b) each identified a unique group of students as leaders. A similar group emerged in this study. Six of the ten activity indicators for the leadership factor were formal leadership roles on campus. Two of the remaining four were activity programs intended specifically for student leaders, with the final two indicators being activities sponsored by the Student Life Board, the core leadership board on campus. The factor loadings for these indicators ranged from .30 to .57. Reported involvement for 71 of the 201 students in the sample (35.3%) was at least one standard deviation above the mean. This population was quite similar to the sample as a whole with the one exception of commuting students (11.3% of leaders as compared to 23.9% of the sample).

The ten background characteristics explained 10.4% of the variance in the leadership factor. The strongest overall predictor of leadership involvement was entering Concordia as a freshman (.18). This was especially true for Lutheran students. Living in the residence halls had a slight positive influence on leadership involvement, especially for White, non-Lutheran students. Interestingly, higher scores on standardized tests such as the SAT were negatively associated with leadership involvement for students of color. Also interesting was the positive association for non-Lutherans of leadership involvement with higher reports of average hours of weekly employment.

Religious Outsiders

Given that several prior studies identified groups of students who are not involved on campus (Katchadourian & Boli, 1985; Astin, 1993b; Kuh, Hu, & Vesper, 2000), it was not surprising to find a similar group in this study. What was surprising is that 16 of the 19 negative loadings indicated that students were not involved in activities that were uniquely religious in nature—activities such as chapel, bible studies, or religious-related community service. Two of the remaining three activity indicators were for non-participation in plays and concerts, the vast majority of which carry religious themes at Concordia. The final loading, involvement in homecoming, was dropped because of a stronger loading for the collegiate factor (.41 v. -.31) and because it did not fit well conceptually with the other 18 indicators. Loadings for the religious outsider factor ranged from -.32 to -.52. Involvement scores for 66 of the 201 students in the sample (32.8%) were at least one standard deviation above the mean. Whereas the first two factors were highly similar to the sample as a whole, the demographics of religious outsiders were quite different from the sample as a whole. Non-Lutherans, students of color, transfers, and commuters were heavily over-represented in this cohort.

Several statistically significant relationships emerged in the CFA analysis between input characteristics and non-involvement in religious programming. Overall, religious outsiders were likely to be non-Lutherans, students of color, and men. Those who were White or Lutheran were likely to have lower SAT scores. The strongest single predictor was living off campus (-.23), with higher loadings for non-Lutherans. Taken as a whole, the input characteristics explained a full 29.1% of the variance for the religious outsider factor.

Discussion

Non-Majority Students

The results of this study are largely consistent with those of prior typologies (Astin, 1993b; Clark & Trow, 1966; Horowitz, 1987; Katchadourian & Boli, 1985; Kuh, Hu, & Vesper, 2000; Tabor & Hackman, 1976), and may corroborate both research that there are few differences in the involvement of students of color (e.g. the collegiate and leadership factors) (Kuh, Hu, & Vesper, 2000; MacKay & Kuh, 1994), and research that suggests that students of color experience greater levels of social isolation (e.g. the religious outsider factor) (Allen, 1987; DeSousa & Kuh, 1996; Loo & Rolison, 1986; Wagener & Nettles, 1998). Indeed, the results suggest that the experience of students of color is more dichotomous than for their White peers. A significant number of White students seem to be neither highly involved nor highly uninvolved, whereas students of color are more likely to either be highly involved or socially isolated. Further, the results suggest that the experience of religious minorities, in this case denominational minorities at a Christian university, may have similar experiences to those of students of color. If, as noted at the beginning of the paper, social integration is important for retention (Tinto, 1993), or involvement (Astin, 1984) and engagement (Kuh, 2001) are vital for learning, then a significant number of students of color and non-Lutherans are facing significant barriers to a quality educational experience.

Best practice in providing services that enhance learning for students of color at PWIs involves multifaceted programming. One important element of such programming is careful use of ethnic organizations. Tatum (1997) suggests that students have

a “developmental need to explore the meaning of one’s identity with others who are engaged in a similar process” (p.71). In other words, students of color need opportunities to separate from the campus community as a whole to discuss and make meaning of shared experiences. Braxton (2000) identifies this need as the “communal potential” of a campus, a key dynamic that influences student decisions to persist and attain a degree. The same communal need may exist for religious minorities—they need opportunities to meet with other students who share their experiences. Watson and Siler (1984) have demonstrated that Black students involved in such efforts are more likely to interact with their White peers. Hoffman (2004) has shown that enhancements of ethnic organization programming have led to increases in satisfaction and retention rates for students of color. This stated, discussions by researchers such as Loo and Rolison (1986) note that such programmatic efforts, though identified by students of color as vital, are often viewed by White students as acts of self-segregation. The same may be true of programmatic efforts targeting, for example, Catholic students attending a Baptist university. Though programming targeting religious minorities has a basis in the literature and in best practice, it may also carry political overtones of which student affairs professionals need to be aware.

Religious or Denomination as Difference

One of the most significant contributions of this study to current theory is the introduction of religion and denomination as important expressions of diversity, at least at Christian universities. Supporting research by Astin (1993a) and Velez (1985) suggests that this may also be true, though to a lesser degree, at public colleges and universities. Though some at evangelical or non-denominational colleges and universities may be tempted to dismiss or devalue the influence of denomination because their institutions are not formally associated with a denomination, one should first carefully consider the experience of a Roman Catholic student at a non-denominational college, or the experience of a liberal Protestant at an evangelical university. In any case, a holistic understanding of the many individual, cohort-specific, and communal influences on student growth and learning must include an understanding of religious difference.

Commuters

Though not surprising, the results of this study clearly demonstrate that commuting students are less involved in collegiate and leadership activities and more likely to be associated with the religious outsider factor. Recent work by Braxton (2000) suggests that social programming is more important for the retention of residential students, while involvement in academic communities is more important for commuter campuses and commuter students. In this light, the non-involvement in cocurricular activities by commuting students may not be as troubling as the cocurricular non-involvement of residential students. Braxton suggests that universities spend less energy trying to involve commuting students in the cocurriculum, and more energy in assessing the pre-matriculation characteristics of commuters and the influence of such characteristics on measures of student success. Braxton further suggests that colleges with commuter populations conduct regular audits of their student policies to identify and eliminate potential barriers to their success at the university.

Limitations

The study has two primary limitations. The first was the sample. The sample size was small and represented only 27.9% of the entire student body. Transfer students were largely omitted from consideration. Further, the sample does not represent a random subset of students, but only those for whom two consecutive years of developmental transcript data were available. Thus, also omitted from the sample were many students who dropped out and students who opted out of the developmental transcript program. It is reasonable to believe that the involvement of these students is significantly different than that of the 201 included in the final sample.

A second limitation was the source of the involvement data. Whereas the developmental transcript is comprehensive and detailed, it does comprise self-reported data and does not consider the amount of time spent in a given activity, or the degree of engagement with which the student participated.

Closing

Different students engage in their learning experiences in college in different ways and to different degrees. If student affairs professionals are to serve as advocates of holistic student learning, additional research about the unique experiences of religious and denominational minorities will be needed. Such efforts should extend beyond the scope of this project, ideally involving multiple campuses, and should focus on the relationship between various forms of involvement and specific student learning outcomes.

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