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Gender Differences in Student Engagement among Emerging Adults Attending a Small Faith-Based University

By Melvin P. Shuster, Ph.D

Abstract

The single best predictor of the success of university sponsored student development activities is the degree to which the students are engaged in these activities (Kuh, 2007). Sax (2008) observes though that much of our understanding of the impact of the college experience is based on the study of students in the aggregate, with relatively little work done on how the college environment differentially influences men and women. The present work investigated gender differences among Emerging Adults (ages 18- 29) (Arnett, 2000) in their engagement of university sponsored activities at a small faith based university located in Northern California. The study found that women were significantly more engaged in student government while men were significantly more engaged in sports. Recommendations are made for institutional policy and future research.

Introduction

Universities offer their students a wide variety of curricular and extracurricular activities during their time in school. One goal of these activities is to assist the students in their overall development. A major factor in the success of the university's efforts to promote development is the degree to which the students are engaged in the institutionally sponsored activities. Harper, Carini, Bridges, and Hayek (2004) observe that student engagement, both in and outside of the classroom, is positively correlated with many outcomes such as cognitive and intellectual development. In fact, according to Kuh, the level of engagement of the student in educationally purposeful activities is the "single best predictor of their learning and personal development" (Kuh, 2007, p.1). These observations suggest that any investigation of the impact of the university experience on development should include a look at how students are engaging the university culture, specifically the opportunities, roles, and responsibilities which they are offered.

A social phenomenon, described by Arnett (2000), provides a context for understanding students' motivation for engaging the university culture. Arnett argues that this phenomenon, which he titled Emerging Adulthood, includes individuals 18 to 29 who, in general, are taking longer to settle into adult roles than past generations. Their engagement with the university culture is motivated by a desire to explore their life and career path. Specifically, Arnett (2004) found that they attend college in order to 1) learn skills that will help them find a good job, 2) take a variety of courses, 3) have the opportunity to explore different majors, 4) have fun; romances, friendships, camaraderie, and partying, 5) be inspired by new ideas, and 6) experience personal growth.

Sax (2008) subscribes to the belief that students benefit by engaging the university culture. She points out, though, that much of our understanding of the impact of the college experience is based on the study of students in the aggregate with relatively little work done on how the college environment differentially influences men and women. Given this lack of knowledge, Sax argues that a major focus of future research should be on how males and females are affected differently by their college experiences.

The focus of the present study was to investigate how students were engaging the opportunities, roles, and responsibilities offered at a small, faith-based university in Northern California. The goal was to identify possible gender differences in this engagement. The hope is that by investigating these gender differences, as recommended by Sax (2008), the findings will shed light on the connection between Arnett's (2004) theories concerning Emerging Adults' expectations for college and Kuh's (2007) student development engagement theories. A stronger, empirically-based link between these two theories will assist college personnel in their effort to provide activities which their students deem important and which also promote development.

The literature review was limited to those topics covered on the survey used to collect the data. The survey was a modification of one used by Nelson (2003) in his investigation of Emerging Adulthood. The topics include gender differences in 1) general engagement of the university culture as evidenced by participation in fine arts events, musicals, and clubs, 2) religiosity, as evidenced by attendance at on-campus Bible studies and involvement in school-sponsored mission trips, 3) involvement in student government, 4) involvement with on-campus work, 5) exercising and involvement in sports, and 6) study habits, as evidenced by hours spent each week studying.

Literature Review

Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) summarized several developmental models by Josselson (1973, 1987, 1996), Baxter Magolda (1992), and Gilligan (1986) that attempt to differentiate between how men and women have engaged the campus environment. These models suggest that compared to men, women's struggle for identity tends to be more focused on how effective they perceive themselves to be and how connected they are to others. Women tend to be more active in listening and recording rather than talking and asking questions. They are more active in gathering the ideas of others and more focused on values of care and connection than justice. Commenting on these views, Sax (2008) observed that one might suppose from these theories that a woman's development is more dependent on her connections with others in the community and on developing a care orientation than a man's development.

Research related to gender differences in university culture engagement was conducted in 2005 by the Office of Institutional Research at the university under investigation. The school conducted an institution-wide survey of the student body using the questionnaires provided by the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) (B. Clark, personal communication, May 30, 2008). The questionnaire asked the students about the length of time that they were spending preparing for class, working on- and off-campus, participating in co-curricular activities, relaxing, and socializing. A comparison of the freshmen and senior men and women found that the only significant gender difference in engagement activities was between the male and female freshmen in the amount of off-campus work. The females were working off-campus significantly more hours each week than the males.

A review of the literature by Kinzie et al. (2007) found that college men were more engaged than women in high-status leadership positions and participated more in intercollegiate athletics and recreation. Kinzie determined that freshmen and senior college men spent more time than women in non-academic activities such as relaxing, socializing, and exercising while women spent more time in academic pursuits, attending art exhibits, and participating in community-based activities.

Sax (2008) found differences between freshmen men and women in several categories that could potentially influence how they engage and otherwise experience the college environment. She found that freshmen women were increasingly younger than men, more likely to come from racial/ethnic groups that have traditionally been marginalized, and from families with lower median family incomes. Women were more likely to attend a university to satisfy their parent's wishes, choose a university near home, and rate themselves lower in most measures of self-confidence. Although study time for both genders has decreased substantially in recent years, women were more oriented toward academics, more consistent in their academic engagement, and less interested in politics. Sax discovered that, in general, men spent more time partying, drinking beer, playing sports, and watching television than women. She did not find any evidence to suggest that relationships are more important for the development of females than males. This finding, she notes, is in contrast to the theories put forth by researchers such as Gillian and Josselson. Sax observed that connectedness was important for both gender's development but influenced males and females differently. For example, involvement in sports and exercise was associated with higher academic achievement among women but had a negative association among men. For religious convictions, intercollegiate athletics were associated with greater religious commitment for men and a weaker level of commitment for women. In the area of political involvement, time spent studying or doing homework and attendance at commuter universities were associated with enhanced political engagement for men but not for women. Finally, Sax found that women were experiencing more stress than men, as evidenced by their reporting feelings of being overwhelmed twice as often as men.

A major contributor to the study of student engagement is the Indiana Center for Postsecondary research located on the campus of Indiana University. Their annually administered survey has included student responses from more than 1,300 colleges and universities since its inception in 2000. (National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), 2008). Indiana researchers indicate that since the likelihood of statistical significance is increased by sample size and NSSE samples are relatively large, most of the differences in gender engagement that they observe are statistically significant at an alpha of 0.05. They suggest that a more useful comparison involves the establishment of a practical significance level of perhaps five percent (Shimon Sarraf, personal communication, June 16, 2009). A review of the NSSE (2008) gender-related findings using this criterion revealed the following. The percentages of students engaged in all the response categories for both freshmen and senior men and women in the areas of spiritual activities, preparing for class, and work on- and off-campus were within the five percent practical difference range. In the areas of participating in exercise and physical fitness, the percentage of freshmen men in the "very often" category was eight percent more than freshmen women, while the percentage of senior men was seven percent greater than the senior women in the "very often" category. The percentage differences in the other categories "never," "sometimes," and "often" were within the five percent practical range. For participation in co-curricular activities, the percentage of freshmen and senior women in the "zero" time spent category was seven percent more than for the corresponding men whereas the percentage differences in the other co-curricular categories of, "1-5," "6 - 10," "11 - 15," "16 - 20," "21 - 25," "26 - 30," and "more than 30" hours per week were within the five percent range. For relaxing and socializing and the same response options, eight percent more freshmen women and nine percent more senior women spent "1 to 5 hours each week" involved in these activities than the corresponding men. There were no practical differences in the other response categories.

Given the findings of the literature review, the hypotheses were that compared to men, women:

1. would exhibit the same overall engagement of the university culture. This hypothesis stems from fact that NSSE (2008) found no gender differences in participation in clubs and groups. Even though Sax (2008) found that women were more likely to participate in these activities, the NSSE sample provides a better representation of the school under investigation. The NSSE sample was taken from freshmen and seniors while the Sax sample included only freshmen. It was believed that any greater levels of engagement on the part of women, perhaps due to a perceived developmental need to connect, would be evidenced by women being more involved in fine arts activities, musical presentations, and clubs.
2. would demonstrate equal levels of engagement in spirituality/religious activities. This hypothesis is based on findings from both Sax (2008) and NSSE (2008). Sax found that religious commitment is strengthened for both genders at religious institutions such as the one under investigation. NSSE found no practical differences in gender participation in spiritual activities. It was thought that this commitment would be evidenced by equal involvement in weekly on-campus Bible studies and school-sponsored mission trips.
3. would be equally interested in student government. This hypothesis was more tentative than the others and stems from two conflicting findings that were difficult to separate. First, less interest among women in student government is suggested by Sax's (2008) finding that women, in general, entered college with less interest in politics. She found, though, that women's interest in political engagement tends to increase and men's decreases with attendance at a residential campus, such as the one being investigated. Sax (2008) does not propose any specific reasons for why women would be more motivated in the area of political involvement than men by attendance at a residential campus, but perhaps, as the theorists summarized by Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) suggest, more involvement by women is part of an overall desire to connect with the community. In the absence of any more definitive findings on this topic, it was believed that these two phenomena, entrance characteristics and impact of the college community, would balance out in the present cross-sectional study.
4. would be more active in seeking jobs while in school. This hypothesis stems from the work by Sax (2008) and NSSE (2005). Sax found that women were entering college from families with lower median family incomes than men. This suggests that they would more likely seek work to support their time at college. Although the needed funds might be obtained in other ways besides through work. Also, the NSSE study at the university under investigation found that freshmen women were working off-campus significantly more hours each week than men.

5. would, based on the findings from Kinzie (2007), NSSE (2008), and Sax (2008), participate less in exercise and sports.
6. would, based on the findings from Sax (2008), NSSE (2005), and NSSE (2008), be spending the same amount of time studying. This hypothesis stems from the belief that the NSSE (2005) university-specific study and the NSSE (2008) national study, which found no significant difference between the times that men and women spent preparing for class, more accurately describes the university under investigation than Sax's findings that freshmen women were more academically oriented than men.

Methods

Participants

We administered a survey to 155 students between the ages of 18 and 26 attending a small, faith-based university in Northern California. The mean age of the participants (97 females, 58 males) was 20.4 years ($SD = 1.5$). The participants were predominantly Caucasian (74%). The class standing breakdown of those surveyed was 13.6% freshmen, 29.2% sophomores, 31.8% juniors, and 25.3% seniors.

Measure

The 109-item survey was a modification of the survey used by Nelson (2003) with several items adjusted for the college community being studied. The questions used for the present study were taken from Nelson's survey section on college involvement. These nine questions queried the students about the nature of their engagement with school-sponsored activities. The actual questions are presented in the Results section. Chapel attendance was not included in this analysis because it was required by the university.

Statistical Analysis

A cross-tab analysis was performed on the nine questions dealing with students' engagement in university-sponsored activities. This analysis was performed using a chi-square test of independence with gender as the independent variable and the somers'd statistic used to measure the strength of association. The Null hypothesis was that the specific activity tested was independent, at an alpha of 0.05, from gender.

Results

A summary of the survey questions and student responses is presented in Table 1. A cross-tab analysis of all nine questions found only two university-sponsored activities to be significantly related to gender at an alpha of 0.05, involvement in student government and college-sponsored sports. The Pearson Chi-square (asymmetric) and somers'd for involvement for student government was 0.014 and -0.182 respectively, while the same findings for college-sponsored sports was 0.007 and 0.193.

The Chi-square findings reflect the fact that roughly 16% of the men and 34% of the women said that they were involved in student government, whereas approximately 37% of the men and 18% of the women said that they were involved in college-sponsored sports. The somers'd significant findings for student government and

college-sponsored sports suggests that in each case, the strength of association was significant but weak.

A comparison of the significant findings with past research reveals agreement in the area of sports and disagreement in the area of student government. As with the present study, Kinzie (2007), Sax (2008), and NSSE (2009) found that males were significantly more involved in sports than females. Contrary to the present study, Sax (2008) found that more men were interested in politics than women.

Discussion

Several observations can be made concerning these findings as they relate to the original hypotheses.

1. Overall engagement

The hypothesis was that women and men would exhibit the same overall engagement with the university culture. The findings support this hypothesis. This was evidenced by the fact that the Pearson Chi-square test for gender and the three activities studied, fine arts activities, musical performances, and clubs, was not significant at an alpha of 0.05. This finding could mean that there was no differential desire between men and women to connect with their environment in the ways studied. This explanation is in line with Sax's (2008) findings that connectedness is important to both males and females. The findings could also mean that there were gender differences in students' interests in the activities studied and/or gender differences in the students' ability or opportunity to engage these specific activities. Interestingly, the findings suggest that neither males nor females were heavily involved in the activities studied. This does not mean that the students studied were not engaged in some way with the university culture, just not with these activities. Also, it is possible that the survey did not include those students that were involved in the investigated activities.

2. Religiosity/spirituality

The hypothesis was that men and women would report equal levels of engagement in spiritual/religious activities. The findings support this hypothesis and are in line with the findings from Sax (2008) and NSSE (2008). This was evidenced by the fact that the Pearson Chi-square test for gender and the spiritual/religious activities studied was not significant at an alpha of 0.05. It is possible that, because of the faith-based nature of the institution under study, students exhibiting similar levels of religiosity are attracted to the school. Also, as suggested in the original hypothesis, perhaps the culture at the university under investigation influences men and women equally in the area of religious commitment.

3. Student government

The hypothesis was that women would be equally involved in student government as men. The findings indicate that women were significantly more

involved in student government than men. This result does not support the original hypothesis. As the original hypothesis stemming from Sax's (2008) work indicated, there were at least two competing factors related to the level of engagement of men and women in student government: less interest in politics among entering women and a general increase among women, and a decrease among men in interest in politics with length of attendance in a residential campus. These findings suggest that in the area of involvement in student government, these two factors did not cancel out as originally hypothesized. This could mean that there was greater interest among incoming women in student government and/or that the college environment influenced women more than men to become involved in student government. The difference in the finding from Sax could also reflect a difference in how the students interpret the terms "politics," as used by Sax, and "student government," as used in the present study.

4. Seeking jobs

The hypothesis was that women would be more active in seeking jobs than men. The findings do not support this hypothesis. No significant gender differences were found in the area of seeking jobs. It could be that this difference in results from the previous NSSE (2005) study at the investigated university reflects the fact that the NSSE findings were based only on freshmen and senior students responses whereas the present study included a cross-section of students from all class levels. It is interesting to note that a larger percentage of students of both genders were involved in working on campus than any other activity that was investigated. It appears that this university attracts both men and women who need to work in order to pay for their time at college.

5. Exercise and Sports

The hypothesis was that men would be spending more time engaged in sports and physical activity. The study found that indeed, a significantly larger percentage of men were involved in sports than women. This finding supports the original hypothesis and is in line with work by Kinzie (2007), Sax (2008), and NSSE (2008).

6. Studying

The hypothesis was that women would be studying the same length of time as men. The findings support this hypothesis; no significant difference was found in male and female study times. The findings are in line with the work by NSSE (2005) and NSSE (2008). Even though course enrollment data was not collected, the finding that only 3.5% of the males and 6.3% of the females were studying over 21 hours each week suggests that both genders are under-engaged in this activity. This belief is based on the traditional measure of adequate study time (24 hrs. per week for a 12-unit course load).

Conclusions and Recommendations

The findings for each of the six areas studied suggest the following recommendations and further questions.

1. Overall Student Engagement

The fact that both genders were largely disengaged from those activities studied makes it difficult to examine any gender differences in engagement and raises several questions. What were students doing with their time? Are the college-sponsored activities providing an effective format for promoting student development? What activities, which promote development, would garner more student engagement? College personnel should collect data on student aspirations along the lines suggested by Arnett (2008) and further investigate student engagement patterns. These data could then be used to inform the choice of which college-sponsored activities are offered by the school.

2. Spiritual/Religiosity

The institution should address the general lack of student engagement by using the spiritually-oriented campus activities, such as chapel, to provide a Biblical foundation for engaging one's environment. The college personnel might focus on passages such as Ephesians 2:10 and explain the value in engaging the campus activities for exploring God's plan for their life.

3. Student Government

The institution should build upon the finding that one-third of the women were involved in student government and use this interest to promote personal development in areas found by Sax (2008) to be more often associated with women, such low self-confidence and problems dealing with stress. Internship programs could be established which match young women interested in student government with women, both on- and off-campus, who are experienced in the world of politics and government.

4. On-Campus Work

The institution should make use of the fact that many students engaged the culture through their on-campus employment. College personnel could intentionally use this employment venue to promote and encourage student development and exploration by 1) communicating to the students the connection between their employment and their desire to explore and learn job skills, 2) encouraging those who work with the students to view themselves as role models, and 3) intentionally connecting job descriptions with the institution's student development goals.

5. Sports

The institution should build upon the findings that one-third of the men were active in sports and Sax's (2008) finding that for men, involvement in sports is positively associated with greater religious commitment. Courses could be developed which intentionally seek to promote faith development using the arena of sports.

6. Studying

The finding that both genders were not fully engaging their subjects by way of studying suggests that they may not understand the role that studying plays in achieving their hopes for the future. An effort should be made to communicate the fact that studying is an important way by which they can seek God's will for their lives.

Universities promote student development by establishing on- and off-campus activities and encouraging students to engage in these activities. Often program development must be accomplished with tighter budgets and ever more limited resources. At the same time, students are increasingly interested in spending their college years exploring life and career options. Given this situation, it behooves college personnel to seek to better understand how and why students are engaging the campus culture and use this understanding to inform the choice of school-sponsored activities that the institution offers.

Dr. Mel Shuster has 24 years teaching experience in higher education. He holds a Ph.D. in Education from Walden University.

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Gender Differences in Student Engagement

Table 1: Student Involvement Questions- by gender-percent

	<i>Category 1</i>	<i>Category 2</i>	<i>Category 3</i>	<i>Category 4</i>
How many short-term missions' trips have you been on while enrolled at _____ University?	Three or more	Two	One	Zero
Males	0.0	7.0	17.5	75.4
Females	3.1	7.2	16.5	73.2
How many weekly on-campus Bible studies do you participate in?	Three or more	Two	One	Zero
Males	0.0	7.0	33.3	59.6
Females	2.1	0.0	26.8	71.1
Are you now or have you ever been involved in student government in any way?	Yes	No		
Males	15.8	84.2		
Females	34.0	66.0		
Are you now or have you ever been a member of an on-campus club?	Yes	No		
Males	47.4	52.6		
Females	48.5	51.5		
Do you have a paid job on-campus?	Yes	No		
Males	57.9	42.1		
Females	47.4	52.6		
Are you now or have you ever been involved in a college-sponsored sport?	Yes	No		
Males	36.8	63.2		
Females	17.5	82.5		
Are you now or have you ever been involved in college-sponsored fine arts activities, such as theatrical performances?	Yes	No		
Males	5.3	94.7		
Females	13.4	86.6		
Are you now or have you ever been involved in a college-sponsored musical presentation?	Yes	No		
Males	14.0	86.0		
Females	10.3	89.7		
How many hours each week do you study?	21+ / 16 to 20	11 to 15	6 to 10	0 to 5
Males	3.5 / 5.3	33.3	40.4	17.5
Females	6.3 / 18.8	31.3	33.3	10.4