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# What is the Research Basis for Linking Engaged Learning, Student Mental Health and Well-being, and Civic Development?

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# Guiding Questions for the Review

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- I. *Theoretical Perspectives*: How is engaged learning defined in the literature?
- II. *Pedagogies of Engagement*: What does engaged learning look like in practice?
- III. *Linkages with Mental Health and Well-being*: What is the current state of research?
- IV. *Methodological Perspectives*: How can related inquiry be advanced?

# I. Defining “Engaged Learning”

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*Problems in the literature:*

- Multiple theoretical frameworks & practices
- Meaning situated in individual perspective (author, researcher, practitioner, campus)
- No single, unified definition
- Confusion of terminology
- Growing popularity of “engagement” in higher education language and literature

# Engaged learning is...

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From my perspective of practice, *engaged learning* is...

# Perspectives of Learning in College

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- Cognitive-Structural Theory
  - Increasing complexity in terms of meaning making, view of self, judgment, moral reasoning
- Adult and Experiential Learning Theory
  - Integration of experience, reflection, and action; learning as an active, versus passive, process
- Psychosocial Development Theory
  - Multiple domains of learning and development in college (extending beyond cognition)

# Perspectives of Engagement in College

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## INVOLVEMENT PERSPECTIVE

- “Engagement” as a synonym for student involvement
- Engagement as a function of student effort and activity in their learning (Astin 1993)
- College environment functions to encourage involvement (Kuh et al. 1991)
- National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE)

## CIVIC DEVELOPMENT PERSPECTIVE

- Students as becoming “engaged” citizens and responsible members of community (Colby et al. 2003; Jacoby 2004)
- Citizenship capacities and skills necessary for diverse democracy
- The “scholarship of engagement” (Boyer 1996) and the “engaged campus” (Hollander, Saltmarsh and Zlotkowski 2002)

# Engaged Learning: Toward a Definition

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## ***Engaged Learning From the Involvement Perspective (A Crisis of Quality):***

- Optimal learning that is: inherently active and integrative of experience; marked by increasingly complex ways of knowing and doing; interactive with social contexts; and holistic in encompassing multiple domains of self.

## ***Engaged Learning from the Civic Engagement Perspective (A Crisis of Relevancy):***

- Learning that has as its purpose development of students' civic capacities for democratic participation and engagement in community life.

*More conceptual work is needed to define, delineate, and potentially integrate these perspectives... though they frequently converge at the crossroads of pedagogy.*

## II. Pedagogies of Engagement

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- Vary widely in formulation
- Counternormative in higher education
- Share assumption that knowledge is co-constructed by communities of teachers and learners (Palmer 1998)
- Generally reflect involvement perspective of engagement; many also based in civic engagement perspective
- Often used in tandem (no discrete categories)



# Four Strands of Engaged Pedagogy

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1. **SERVICE-LEARNING**
2. **COMMUNITY-BASED RESEARCH (CBR)**
3. **COLLABORATIVE LEARNING**
4. **PROBLEM-BASED LEARNING (PBL)**

Edgerton (1997) and Colby et al. (2003)

# Other Forms of Engaged Pedagogy

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- Intergroup dialogue
- Co-curricular service
- Internship/practicum experiences
- Interdisciplinary team teaching
- Learning communities
- Academic and student affairs partnerships

# *Cultures of Engagement*

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- Research demonstrates advantages of engaged pedagogy for student learning and development
- Yet, student experiences of engaged pedagogy usually limited both in frequency and duration
- Increasing number and duration of engaged learning experiences helpful, but not transformative
- *Cultures of engagement* shift engaged learning from the periphery to the center of teaching and learning

### III. Linkages with Student Mental Health and Well-being

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*What is mental health and well-being?*

- Complex constructs involving self-concept, self-efficacy, realization of potential, coping abilities, relational skills, decision-making (SAMHSA 2005, WHO 2005)
- BTtoP delimits and operationalizes these concepts through two “crises” facing college students: depression and substance abuse

# Current State of the Research

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*The research base for linking engaged learning, student mental health and well-being, and civic development is **preliminary** and **limited** in nature.*

## Two research-based linkages:

- Findings from involvement measures
- Stress in academic environments

## Two theoretical linkages:

- Developmental challenge and support
- Moral development and personal and social responsibility

# Research-Based Linkage #1

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## Findings from involvement measures:

- Elements of engaged learning (e.g., group work, interaction with faculty) correlated with self-report of better emotional health and reduced drinking behaviors (Astin 1993; Sax, Bryant and Gilmartin 2002)
- Correlation between participation in pro-social activities (e.g., community service) and lower rates of heavy drinking (Wechsler et al. 1995, Jessor et al. 1995, Fenzel 2005)
- Causal relationships difficult to infer from these correlations, which are generally of small magnitude (especially compared to peer influence)

# Research-Based Linkage #2

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## Stress in academic environments:

- Moderate levels of stress correlated with optimal performance (Whitman, Spendlove and Clark 1986)
- Extreme levels of stress (common in academic environments) inhibit learning and potentially affect emotional health and behavior (Janis 1982)
- Student involvement in active – versus passive – learning may help reduce stress by giving students control of their learning (Whitman, Spendlove and Clark)
- Suggests that engaged learning that facilitates optimal levels of stress may, in turn, reduce mental health problems resulting from extreme stress

# Theoretical Linkage #1

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## Developmental challenge and support:

- Depression and substance abuse as resulting from developmental “overchallenge” in the college environment (Mann 1992, Rivinus 1992)
- Challenges must be balanced with environmental supports for learning and development to occur (Sanford 1966)
- Is engaged learning one potential support?



# Theoretical Linkage #2

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## Moral development and personal and social responsibility:

- Students' level of moral development is negatively correlated with substance abuse and other self-injurious behaviors (Berkowitz 2000)
- Therefore types of learning that encourage moral development may help reduce these behaviors
- Is engaged learning one potential type?

# IV. Methodological Perspectives

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- Though preliminary, there is sufficient evidence in the research and suggestion in the literature to warrant further examination of linkages between engaged learning, student mental health and well-being, and civic development.
- Therefore, how can this inquiry be advanced?

# Research Issues to Consider

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*Research on these linkages is inherently...*

- Multivariate
  - Complex convergence of identity, experience, behavior
- Time-sensitive
  - Maturation issues
  - Limited timeframe of forms of engaged learning
  - Extended impact beyond immediate experience
- Contextual
  - Students' lives (past history and concurrent events)
  - Forms of engaged learning (vary widely and resist generalization)

# Generative Forms of Inquiry

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*Generative research designs are likely to be...*

- Multivariate: Variety of instruments to assess multiple dimensions of students' identity, experiences, and behavior, as well as specific engaged learning experience
- Longitudinal: Involving more extensive data collection beyond pre-test/post-test right before and after experience
- Quasi-Experimental: Adequate control or comparison group where possible
- Assessment-Based: In addition to research, embedded in course/program level and campus-wide assessment

# Concluding Recommendations

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*On individual campuses and  
across higher education:*

- Interdisciplinary dialogue
- Inviting and engaging students
- Broad and meaningful commitments
- A community perspective

# Questions to Consider...

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- Keeping in mind your earlier definition, what engaged learning experiences does your campus provide?
- What linkages might you anticipate or expect to find between engaged learning, student mental health and well-being, and civic development on your campus?
- How might you go about facilitating or enhancing these linkages on your campus?
- How might you plan to research and/or assess these linkages on your campus?

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