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

AAC&U Bringing Theory to Practice
2nd Annual Working Conference, April 15, 2005

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Guiding Questions for the Review

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”

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…

From my perspective of practice, engaged learning is…
Perspectives of Learning in College

- **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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INVOLVEMENT PERSPECTIVE</th>
<th>CIVIC DEVELOPMENT PERSPECTIVE</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Engagement” as a synonym for student involvement</td>
<td>Students as becoming “engaged” citizens and responsible members of community (Colby et al. 2003; Jacoby 2004)</td>
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<td>Engagement as a function of student effort and activity in their learning (Astin 1993)</td>
<td>Citizenship capacities and skills necessary for diverse democracy</td>
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<td>College environment functions to encourage involvement (Kuh et al. 1991)</td>
<td>The “scholarship of engagement” (Boyer 1996) and the “engaged campus” (Hollander, Saltmarsh and Zlotkowski 2002)</td>
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<td>National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE)</td>
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Engaged Learning: Toward a Definition

**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

- 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

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

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

- 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
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
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

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)
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

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

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

- 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

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

*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

On individual campuses and across higher education:

- Interdisciplinary dialogue
- Inviting and engaging students
- Broad and meaningful commitments
- A community perspective
Questions to Consider…

- 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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