

Investigating Student Study Engagement among College Students across Year Levels

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Abstract

Recognizing the peculiar nature of college degrees, this paper endeavored to examine student engagement in a sample of 859 college students enrolled in the degree Bachelor of Science in Accountancy. Using the Student Engagement Instrument (Anderson, 2006) and employing a descriptive design, the researchers examined student engagement in the subscales of Teacher Student Relationship, Peer Support for Learning, Family Support for Learning, Control and Relevance of Schoolwork, Future Goals and Aspirations, and Extrinsic Motivation. The results showed that, for highly technical courses like the Bachelor of Science in Accountancy, the subscale on Teacher Student Relationship registered the lowest number and percentage of engaged students. Consequently, the only subscale which registered significant difference among means is Control and Relevance of Schoolwork. The post hoc test using Tukey's Honestly Significant Difference (HSD) further revealed that the significant differences for this subscale are registered between students in the 1st, 3rd and 4th years, and students in the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th years.

Keywords: student engagement, student engagement instrument, accounting education, college students' level of engagement

1.0 Introduction

Student academic achievement is a puzzle that has continued to baffle the academia. Pried and prodded by numerous studies, it has been examined in relation to intelligence quotients (Silverberg, 2008), past academic excellence as measured by standardized tests (Dollinger et al, 2008; Kim and Conard, 2006; Plant et al, 2005), gender (Millán et al, 2012), class attendance (Crede et al, 2010), and psychological constructs such as behavior, motivation, and self discipline (Berry et al, 2011; Bennett, 2011; Duckworth and Seligman, 2005). Starting the mid-1990s, however, the lens that examined student achievement shifted its focus to student engagement (Trowler, 2010),

boldly asserting that the students' path to success is ultimately molded and shaped by the importance they place in learning. The significance of student engagement could not have been made any clearer than the declaration by Newmann (1992) that the most urgent and stubborn concern among students, teachers, and the academic universe is not low achievement but student disengagement. The said declaration came with a picture of how student disengagement can be manifested in different ways, some of which are so subtle that one can easily overlook it. For example, Newmann (1992) pointed out that, typically, even disengaged students exhibit good behavior in school. However, if one looks closely one would see that, despite the fact that they attend classes and complete their

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tasks, these disengaged students harbor a “lack of excitement, commitment, or pride in mastery of the curriculum” (Newmann, 1992). Krause (2005) also pointed this out, referring to student disengagement as the state of indifference, apathy, or sometimes even disillusionment. Harper and Quaye (2009) further cautioned against students working only for compliance or mere involvement (i.e. those who act but are not engaged), and students who are dissociated (i.e. those who are engaged but do not act).

Taking the flipside of these foreboding pictures will reveal engaged students who are so enthused about their studies that they go beyond the mere performance of schoolwork and educational requirements; students who see the value of their studies beyond the context of grades; students who shun superficial involvement in exchange for inspired participation. To the educators, then, an engaged student is a dream come true. To have students who intensely appreciate and are attracted to what they are taught and students who clearly see the direction of what these teachings can bring them in the future would equate to students who are dynamic, alive and inspired as opposed to the perfunctory attendance in class and the obligatory completion of academic tasks. To institutions of higher education, engaged students can be a remedy to the demands for quality graduates. Considering that institutional accountability is on the rise, student success becomes a central issue (Hu, 2011; Kerby, 2007). As Kuh (2003) contends, what students do during their time in school has more impact to their success and development than what they bring to higher education and where they study. The challenge then, not just for the teachers but also to educational institutions, is how to harness the power that comes from student engagement, and how to maximize its malleability to direct it towards molding academic success.

It is interesting to note though that, despite the

obvious concurrence on the importance of student engagement, there seems to be no consensus on one acceptable definition for the phenomenon in focus. Appleton (2008) noted 19 different definitions of student engagement, further pointing out 8 varying terminologies that all refer to student engagement. Trowler (2010), on the other hand, attributed the differences in definitions and terms to the historical roots and traditions of the bodies of work that explored student engagement, with those in North America and Australasia rooted in “student involvement” while those in the UK is anchored on “student feedback, student representation, and student approaches”. Despite the differences in the vocabulary and the jargon, a unified stand is made on the multidimensionality of student engagement (Appleton, 2008). For instance, Nelson, Kift and Clarke (2012) proposed a model of student engagement that identified input, process, and output factors. Solomonides et al (2012), on the other hand, suggested testing student engagement in the context of relationships that facilitate the understanding of student experiences. Appleton et al (2006) recommended the measurement of student engagement on the basis of behavioral and cognitive subscales.

Empirical studies have also been made regarding student engagement. Vibert and Shields (2003) connected student engagement to ideology, noting that “student engagement” cannot be defined in an absolute sense since student engagement is ideological and political in nature. Student engagement was also often linked to persistence in higher education. Hu (2010) found out that the relationship between student engagement and the probability of persisting in college is not linear. The academic engagement of students tends to decrease the probability of persisting, while the students’ high social engagement increases probability of persisting in college. In a study by Bass and Ballard

(2012), stimulated student engagement were found to have an optimistic effect on university students, and may result to effective and improved retention of students. Among genders, there may also be varying levels of study skill engagement, suggesting that females may have a higher mean (Bass & Ballard, 2012). The study by Parikh (2008) suggests students across the world are likely to be engaged in certain activities that may have a direct impact with their grade point averages, which may suggest that academic performance can influence if not strengthen student engagement. A flipped classroom format was also found to have improved student engagement of pharmacy students (McLaughlin, 2013). Heller (2010) sought to find out if the engineering students and faculty see student engagement in the same manner. The findings of the study revealed that they were not able to arrive at a single definition.

A review of the literature surrounding student engagement spins the tale of a phenomenon that is agreed to be necessary and yet is so complicated that neither a single measurement nor definition is considered more appropriate than the other. But more interesting is the observation that, with the exception of the researches related to pharmacy students (McLaughlin, 2013) and engineering students (Heller, 2010), student engagement has been investigated in the context of the general student populace. The samples used in the existing studies were either from middle school and high school or collected from various collegiate courses/degrees. Studies that focus on the population of students enrolled under the same undergraduate college program have remained scarce. It is because of this that the researchers propose to examine student engagement among learners of the same undergraduate degree. Recognizing the peculiarity of each undergraduate college degree, the researchers deemed it necessary to take a more focused view of the level of student engagement

by choosing to explore it in a stratum that equalizes the nature and direction of the teachings acquired, the extent of pressure and curriculum difficulty, as well as the unique academic requirements attached to a particular undergraduate program. While examining engagement levels in a diverse sample is indeed important, the researchers contend that the conclusions reached therein may have been diluted by the diversity of the sample. As such, it may be equally important to explore engagement levels in a discrete group so as to account for the difference in the academic environment that they exist.

The contribution of this study to the pool of knowledge that is devoted to student engagement was the microscopic study of the said phenomenon. The inspection of the levels of student engagement of a distinct college degree afforded a more customized view, recognizing that the uniqueness of each college degree deserves an analysis all to its own. This paper embarked to look into levels of student engagement across year levels in order to probe the differences among them, as well as to look into the factors that influence such differences. Additionally, the researchers were interested to discover the impact of highly technical courses and the unique set of pressures placed upon its students to the students' engagement levels. Considering that educational policy making takes into account student engagement levels, it is but appropriate to acknowledge the individuality that comes with tertiary education courses. This paper, then, endeavored to create a profile of a particular undergraduate program through the lens of student engagement.

2.0 Methodology

Participants

A total of 859 students from a local university served as respondents for this study. The respondents represented all the students enrolled

in the program Bachelor of Science in Accountancy for the second semester of school year 2013-2014. The researchers opted to analyze engagement levels among students of the same undergraduate course in order to remove differences in academic requirements specific to that particular program. The decision of which program to use was reached when a closer inspection of the curriculum of the

Bachelor of Science in Accountancy program in the said university revealed that it was the only undergraduate program offering that had a cut-off grade requirement of 2.0 (equivalent to 80%). All other undergraduate degrees require only a 3.0 (equivalent to 60%) passing mark. Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics of the sample.

	n	Mean Age	StDev	Minimum Age	Median Age	Maximum Age	Females	Males
1st year	395	17.041	1.009	16	17	23	321	74
2nd year	236	17.915	0.727	16	18	22	181	55
3rd year	152	18.908	0.809	18	19	24	106	46
4th year	76	19.763	0.586	19	20	21	53	23

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics in Terms of Age and Gender of the Sample

Table 1 presents the distribution of the 859 respondents. It can be seen that, from the 1st year to the 4th year, a majority of the student-respondents are females. Moreover, Table 1 shows that there is not much variability in the age of the respondents, with average age ranging from 17 to 19 years.

Measures and Procedures

To ascertain the level of student engagement, the researchers made use of the Student Engagement Instrument (SEI), a self report survey originally designed for middle and high school students by Appleton, Christenson, and Furlong (2006). This instrument is composed of 35 face valid statements that attempt to measure the respondents' cognitive and affective engagement. The 35 face valid statements are scored on a four-point scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The Student Engagement Instrument is comprised of six subscales: Teacher/Student Relationship (9 items), Peer Support Learning (6 items), Family Support for Learning (4 items), Control and Relevance of School Work

(9 items), Future Aspirations and Goals (5 items), and Extrinsic Motivation (2 items). Appleton et al (2006) measured the psychometric properties of this instrument on a sample of 1,931 ninth grade students; internal consistency reliability estimates among the subscales ranged from 0.78 to 0.88. The validity of the SEI has been further tested by Betts et al (2010), extending the respondents to cover varying grade levels. The said study uncovered evidence of score reliability and factorial invariance across grades and gender. Aside from being initially validated through ninth grade students and subsequently revalidated across grade levels, the SEI has also been used on college students (Grier-Reed et al, 2012) and has, thus, further displayed its factorial invariance. This instrument was administered to the respondents of this current study after appropriate approval and consent were obtained. Responses were then tallied and analyzed.

In order to examine levels of student engagement, the researchers compared the results from the 1st year, 2nd year, 3rd year, and 4th year students through the use of histograms for each of the six subscales. Using

Analysis of Variance (ANOVA), the researchers then proceeded to determine whether there is any significant difference in the levels of engagement among the four year levels. For the variables exhibiting a significant difference among means, the researchers employed the Tukey's Honestly Significant Difference (HSD) test as a post hoc test to determine which of the means differ.

3.0 Results and Analyses

After administering the Student Engagement Instrument and tabulating the results thereof, the researchers proceeded to analyze the data. Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics of each year level in each of the six subscales where TS = Teacher/Student Relationship, PS = Peer Support for Learning, FS = Family Support for Learning, SW = Control and Relevance of Schoolwork, G = Future Aspirations and Goals, and E = Extrinsic Motivation. The numbers 1 to 4 are used to refer to 1st year, 2nd year, 3rd year, and 4th year students, respectively. With the exception of the subscale on extrinsic motivation, average ratings of 3.0 or higher are interpreted as showing engagement in school. Extrinsic motivation, on the other hand, is the only subscale where low averages (i.e. 2.0 or lower) show strong engagement levels. For each of the six subscales, the researchers identified

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of Student Engagement Levels Per Subscale

Variable	n	Mean	St Dev
TS 1	395	2.91	0.39
TS 2	236	2.94	0.37
TS 3	152	2.84	0.44
TS 4	76	2.85	0.37
PS 1	395	3.14	0.38
PS 2	236	3.16	0.41
PS 3	152	3.14	0.36
PS 4	76	3.15	0.32
FS 1	395	3.49	0.49
FS 2	236	3.44	0.51
FS 3	152	3.45	0.49
FS 4	76	3.47	0.53
SW 1	395	3.37	0.33
SW 2	236	3.33	0.35
SW 3	152	3.13	0.37
SW 4	76	3.19	0.35
G 1	395	3.83	0.27
G 2	236	3.81	0.34
G 3	152	3.77	0.30
G 4	76	3.81	0.25
E 1	395	1.66	0.57
E 2	236	1.68	0.62
E 3	152	1.62	0.59
E 4	76	1.72	0.65

the number of students for each year level that exhibit engagement in school. Table 3 shows the engagement profile of the students among the different year levels in relation to the six subscales.

Table 3: Number and Percentage of Engaged Students across Subscales

Subscale	1st year (n=395)		2nd year (n=236)		3rd year (n=152)		4th year (n=76)		Total (n=859)	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
TS	194	49.11	120	50.85	67	44.08	34	44.74	415	48.31
PS	292	73.92	184	77.97	118	77.63	60	78.95	654	76.14
FS	351	88.86	211	89.41	138	90.79	65	85.53	765	89.06
SW	361	91.39	207	87.71	113	74.34	61	80.26	742	86.38
G	393	99.49	232	98.31	148	97.37	75	98.68	848	98.72
E	361	91.39	207	87.71	139	91.45	66	86.84	773	89.99

As shown in Table 3, the highest number and percentage of engaged students is in the subscale for Future Aspirations and Goals. Considering that the Bachelor of Science in Accountancy program has a clear cut career path for its graduates, this result was interpreted to mean that students enrolled in this program are aware and convinced of the importance of their course as well as the opportunities that will be available for them in the future. In addition, graduates of this program are perceived to be highly employable.

Table 3 also shows that the subscale on teacher/student relationships registered the lowest total number and percentage of engaged students among the six subscales. An inspection of the Student Engagement Instrument revealed that the items for this subscale refer to the following statements: "My teachers are there for me when I need them", "Adults at my school listen to students", "The school rules are fair", "Most teachers in my school are interested in me as a person, not just as a student", "Overall, my teachers are open and honest with me", "Overall, adults in my school treat students fairly", "I enjoy talking to the teachers here", "I feel safe at school", and "At my school, teachers care about students". An inquiry into the content of the curriculum of the Bachelor of Science in Accountancy program revealed its very technical nature so much so that the interactions between teachers and students often linger in academic discussions rather than personal relations.

Further investigation disclosed that, owing to the demands of producing quality graduates who will pass the Certified Public Accountants board examination after graduation, the major subjects (i.e. accounting, taxation, and law) are often loaded

with so many topics that need to be covered within a semester. In addition, entrenched in the program are departmental tests and qualifying examinations. These put pressure on the teachers to finish the coverage, often at the expense of developing a more personal exchange among students. The researchers also attribute this to the strict retention policy of the program. The strict implementation of the cut-off grade of 2.0 (equivalent to 80%) in the major subjects often breeds the misconception that teachers are stern, inconsiderate, and unyielding in the computation of the students' grades. The researchers also looked into the average class density. With the number of students averaging 40 per class, it is indeed difficult for the teachers to reach out to their students, thus the perception that they don't "care" about them. Adding to this are the constraints in time and the coverage of the subjects. With barely enough time to finish the coverage, teachers often do not have the luxury of following up their students individually.

It is interesting to note that, as per Table 4, the subscale on Teacher/Student Relationship showed a p value of 0.05, while only the subscale on Control and Relevance of Schoolwork displayed a p value of less than 0.05, indicating a significant difference in the means. As such, the researchers further investigated this difference by performing the Tukey's Honestly Significant Difference (HSD) test for both variables. Results are shown in Tables 5 and 6. The researchers proceeded to ascertain whether there exists a difference in the means of the datasets. The results of the analysis of variance (ANOVA) are presented in Table 4.

Table 4: Results of the Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) of the Subscales of Student Engagement

ANOVA: TS					
<i>Source of Variation</i>	<i>SS</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>P-value</i>
Between Groups	1.226	3.000	0.409	2.613	0.050
Within Groups	133.717	855.000	0.156		
Total	134.942	858.000			
S = 0.3955 R-Sq = 0.91% R-Sq(adj) = 0.56%			Pooled STDev = 0.3955		
ANOVA: PS					
<i>Source of Variation</i>	<i>SS</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>P-value</i>
Between Groups	0.041	3.000	0.014	0.093	0.964
Within Groups	123.549	855.000	0.145		
Total	123.590	858.000			
S = 0.3801 R-Sq = 0.03% R-Sq(adj) = 0.00%			Pooled StDev = 0.3801		
ANOVA: FS					
<i>Source of Variation</i>	<i>SS</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>P-value</i>
Between Groups	0.409	3.000	0.136	0.547	0.650
Within Groups	213.262	855.000	0.249		
Total	213.672	858.000			
S = 0.4994 R-Sq = 0.19% R-Sq(adj) = 0.00%			Pooled StDev = 0.4994		
ANOVA: SW					
<i>Source of Variation</i>	<i>SS</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>P-value</i>
Between Groups	7.333	3.000	2.444	20.587	0.000
Within Groups	101.521	855.000	0.119		
Total	108.854	858.000			
S = 0.3446 R-Sq = 6.74% R-Sq(adj) = 6.41%			Pooled StDev = 0.3446		
ANOVA: G					
<i>Source of Variation</i>	<i>SS</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>P-value</i>
Between Groups	0.445	3.000	0.148	1.710	0.163
Within Groups	74.123	855.000	0.087		
Total	74.568	858.000			
S = 0.2944 R-Sq = 0.60% R-Sq(adj) = 0.25%			Pooled StDev = 0.2944		
ANOVA: E					
<i>Source of Variation</i>	<i>SS</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>P-value</i>
Between Groups	0.678	3.000	0.226	0.640	0.589
Within Groups	301.592	855.000	0.353		
Total	302.269	858.000			
S = 0.5939 R-Sq = 0.22% R-Sq(adj) = 0.00%			Pooled StDev = 0.5939		

Table 5 shows that, while the analysis of variance presented a p value of 0.05 for the subscale on Teacher/Student relationship, the Tukey's HSD test revealed that there is no significant difference in the means of the four year levels. This lack of significant difference is expected considering that, as per the explanation advanced by the researchers

in Table 3, class density and the technical nature of the course remain the same regardless of the students' academic year level. The relationship between students and teachers remains consistently centered in academic discussions and procedural calculations rather than personal relations.

Table 5: Results of the Tukey's HSD test for Teacher/Student Relationship

Grouping Information Using Tukey Method		
	N	Mean
TS 1	395	2.9113 ^a
TS 2	236	2.9430 ^a
TS 3	152	2.8406 ^a
TS 4	76	2.8480 ^a

Means that do not share a letter are significantly different.

Tukey 95% Simultaneous Confidence Intervals: All Pairwise Comparisons
Individual confidence level : 98.96%

Table 6: Results of the Tukey's HSD test for Control and Relevance of Schoolwork

Grouping Information Using Tukey Method		
	n	Mean
SW 1	395	3.3717 ^a
SW 2	236	3.3258 ^a
SW 3	152	3.1323 ^b
SW 4	76	3.1930 ^b

Means that do not share a letter are significantly different.

Tukey 95% Simultaneous Confidence Intervals: All Pairwise Comparisons
Individual confidence level : 98.96%

The researchers then proceeded to perform a post hoc test for the variable on Control and Relevance of Schoolwork. Results are shown in Table 6.

Both the results of the analysis of variance in Table 4 and the Tukey's HSD test in Table 6 reveal that the subscale on Control and Relevance of Schoolwork shows difference in means among the four year levels. In addition, Table 6 identified the significant differences to exist between the 1st and 3rd year levels, the 1st and 4th year levels, the 2nd and 3rd year levels, and the 2nd and 4th year levels. Table 3 also showed that, in this particular subscale, the 3rd year students had the lowest percentage of engaged students, while the 1st year registered the highest. This means that students feel that they don't have control over their

grades and their schoolwork. In investigating these results, the researchers examined the prospectus of the program and noticed the differences in the number of major subjects and the equivalent number of units. In general, the 1st year and 2nd year levels only have one major subject per semester, with 6 equivalent academic units. The 3rd year students, on the other hand, have 5 major subjects equivalent to a total 18 units in the 1st semester, and 6 major subjects equivalent to a total of 18 units in the second semester. The 4th year students have 4 major subjects with a total equivalent of 12 units in the first semester, and 5 major subjects equivalent to a total of 15 units in the second semester.

The conspicuous discrepancy in the distribution of the number of academic units and

subjects placed the 3rd year level at a disadvantage in terms of difficulty and complexity. The significant differences that exist between the 1st and 2nd year levels from those in the 3rd and 4th year levels can be attributed to the drastic change in the number of subjects and academic units that pertain to major subjects. At this point, one must consider that, by virtue of the technical nature of the program, major subjects are content-based rather student-focused. Consequently, this increase in the number of subjects and units contribute immensely to the pressures and demands placed upon the students.

4.0 Conclusion

A lot of hopes have been anchored on student engagement as the miracle cure to the problem of low academic achievement. This paper opted to take a more focused route by examining student engagement in a microcosm of a particular college degree. Owing to the peculiar nature of the course, the researchers examined the Bachelor of Science in Accountancy program of a local university. It can be inferred from the results that studying student engagement levels can also serve as a tool to assess the curriculum. The level of student engagement can tell the story of a particular program or course offering from a different perspective.

From the results of the study, the researchers conclude that for highly technical degree programs, teacher-student relationships often suffer. Considering the delicate balance that must be maintained between focusing on the content and personal interaction with the students, the latter often takes the backseat. This problem with teacher-student relationships eventually trickled to the area of control and relevance of school work. The perception of students that teachers do not care about them equated to the feeling that their teachers have more control over their grades than they do. Thus, highly technical degrees are currently focused more on the concrete than

the abstract. Despite the current trend towards student centeredness, more focus and attention is still currently invested in the technical aspects of the subjects being taught rather than the students.

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