

Is Doing More a Good Idea? Students' Views of the Impact of Involvement on Academic Outcomes

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Abstract

Evidence exists that how students spend their time while pursuing an academic degree is linked to academic success. However, for commuting students, this link needs to be further examined. To this end, the present action research study specifically examined undergraduate students' participation in student life activities and their perceptions of the impact of such activities on academic performance, academic engagement, and more broadly, university experience. A survey was administered to a convenience sample of 336 full-time undergraduate students at an English-medium university who commuted daily. This study uncovered low participation rates as well as students' subjective views that academic performance and campus life activities are unconnected. The latter views were supported by the absence of an objective relationship between students' GPA and participation in campus life activities. Students, however, had more favorable views of the impact of campus life activities on academic engagement and, more broadly, on their overall experience in higher education. These findings inform an action plan for enhancing the integration between campus life activities and classroom learning. The goal is to ensure that classroom learning is practiced in the real world outside the confines of the classroom walls.

Keywords: *Engagement; academic performance; Middle East; campus life pursuits.*

1. Introduction

Astin's theory of involvement (1999), which focuses on how students spend their time while pursuing an academic degree, has informed much of the extant literature regarding academic success (Burch et al., 2015; Halm, 2015). The theory argues that positive academic outcomes are likely to result from students' devoting effort and time to learning, participating in student organizations, spending time on campus, and interacting with faculty members. A related theory

is that of Tinto (1997; 2017), which argues that students who can integrate the social and academic demands of university life are more likely to persist and graduate. Empirical evidence supports a close relationship between students' engagement in a multitude of campus life activities and academic success (Kulp et al., 2021; Mayhew et al., 2016).

There are two main types of campus life activities. Co-curricular activities refer specifically to events or tasks that are considered to be part of the curriculum. They are intended to enhance its quality and improve learning (Camerato et al., 2019). Examples are undergraduate research opportunities and internships. Extra-curricular activities, instead, are outside of the academic curriculum and lack predefined academic outcomes (Camerato et al., 2019), such as athletics, student government, and clubs. For educators and administrators at universities with large numbers of commuters, students' involvement in activities outside those explicitly requested by the curriculum of a given program is particularly challenging. Yet, such activities are positively related to academic outcomes (Kulp et al., 2021).

Most of the extant literature supporting the link between participation in student life events and student success has focused on institutions of the Global North. As such, it has failed to highlight potential differences in the patterns of students' involvement and subjective views of such involvement in its different manifestations. Thus, our study focuses on an English-medium university in the Middle East following a US curriculum whose students are all commuters. The study is intended to be the first step of an action research plan (Sáez Bondía & Cortés Gracia, 2022), which entails gathering information about a given matter viewed as problematic, implementing changes, and then assessing whether improvement has been made. As the information stage requires, this action research study asked the following questions, each followed by a hypothesis to be tested:

- Q1 How frequently do students participate in campus life activities? If activities are perceived as useful, students will be likely to report frequent participation. Of course, usefulness can be measured in a variety of ways, including one's academic performance, academic engagement, and, more broadly, university experience.
- Q2 Do students see a link between campus life activities and academic performance? If students deem campus life activities to be useful to academic performance, they will report an increase in their performance as a function of participation in student life activities.
- Q3 Do students see a link between campus life activities and academic engagement? More broadly, do they see such activities as linked with their university experience? If students deem campus life activities to be useful to either their academic engagement or their university experience, they will report an enhancement in their engagement or university experience arising from participation in student life activities.

- Q4 Is there an actual link between participation in campus life activities and academic performance (as measured by self-reported GPA)? If the link is not merely perceived but exists in reality, increased participation in student life pursuits should be accompanied by a higher GPA (if participation is beneficial) or a lower GPA (if participation is distracting).

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants were 336 undergraduate students of an English-medium university in the Middle East. There were 154 males and 182 females. Students were enrolled in either STEM programs (e.g., engineering and computer science; $n = 164$) or non-STEM programs (e.g., law, business, and graphic design; $n = 172$). They represented a convenience sample of young learners across educational levels. Students were recruited through an email sent by the Department of Student Affairs during the second part of the fall semester. All participants were full-time students who commuted to and from the university daily during weekdays.

2.2 Materials and Procedure

A questionnaire was specifically developed to assess students' views of student life activities. Before administration, test-retest reliability and face validity were determined to be adequate. Informed consent was preceded by demographic questions (e.g., students' GPA, gender, and academic major) as well as factual and attitudinal questions.

Factual questions concerned the frequency of students' participation in campus life activities. They also included participation in different types of pursuits: (a) extra-curricular activities, such as participation in clubs, sports, or academic competitions, (b) community service and volunteer work, (c) student government and club leadership, and (d) internships, work-study programs or research activities. Answers were provided on a 5-point scale. For simplicity, answers were reorganized into a 3-point scale, including never or rarely (0), once a week (1), and several times a week or daily (2; see Table 1).

Attitudinal questions asked about participants' perceived impact of student life activities on their academic performance, academic engagement, and, broadly, university experience (see Table 2). Questions about the overall impact of student life on academic performance were followed by questions that specifically asked about how the different types of student life pursuits might affect academic performance. Answers were provided on a 3-point scale, including negative impact (-1), no impact (0), and positive impact (+1). The last two questions asked about students' satisfaction with the current array of campus life opportunities and whether campus life opportunities should be more connected with classroom learning activities.

2.3. Data Treatment

Descriptive statistics consisted of percentages, each illustrating the frequency of specific answers. Inferential statistics involved Chi-Squared analyses (i.e., non-parametric tests). These analyses aimed to assess whether significant differences existed in the frequency of participants' answers to a given question. Tests were considered significant at the 0.05 level.

3. Results

Descriptive statistics of students' responses are displayed in Tables 1 and 2. Statistics are organized by the questions they answer.

Q1. How frequently do students participate in campus life activities?

As illustrated in Table 1, most students did not participate or rarely participated in campus life activities (including all different types).

Table 1. Students' Self-Reported Frequency of Participation

<i>Participation in campus life activities</i>	
Never/rarely	61%
Once a week	16%
Several times a week/daily	23%
<i>Specifically, participation in clubs, sports, or academic competitions</i>	
Never/rarely	52%
Once a week	24%
Several times a week/daily	24%
<i>Specifically, participation in community service/volunteer work</i>	
Never/rarely	51%
Once a week	29%
Several times a week/daily	20%
<i>Specifically, participation in student government or club leadership</i>	
Never/rarely	60%
Once a week	16%
Several times a week/daily	24%
<i>Specifically, participation in internships, work programs, or research</i>	
Never/rarely	55%
Once a week	22%
Several times a week/daily	23%

One possible reason for low participation rates could be that activities were not perceived as beneficial. Thus, we asked whether students saw a link between student life pursuits and academic performance.

Q2. Do students see a link between campus life activities and academic performance?

We predicted that if students deemed campus life pursuits beneficial to academic performance, they would have reported an increase in their academic performance as a function of participation in student life activities. Students' answers were mostly in the no-impact categories [$\chi^2(4) \leq 225.88$, *ns*]. Table 2 illustrates this pattern.

Table 2. Students' Views of The Impact of Activities

<i>Participation in campus life activities</i>	
Negative impact on overall university experience	2%
No impact on overall university experience	40%
Positive impact on overall university experience	58%
Decrease engagement	2%
No impact on engagement	44%
Improve engagement	54%
Decrease academic performance	8%
No impact on academic performance	57%
Improve academic performance	35%
<i>Specifically, participation in clubs, sports, or academic competitions</i>	
Decrease academic performance	4%
No impact on academic performance	62%
Improve academic performance	34%
<i>Specifically, participation in community service/volunteer work</i>	
Decrease academic performance	3%
No impact on academic performance	69%
Improve academic performance	28%
<i>Specifically, participation in student government or club leadership</i>	
Decrease academic performance	4%
No impact on academic performance	64%
Improve academic performance	32%
<i>Specifically, participation in internships, work programs, or research</i>	
Decrease academic performance	3%
No impact on academic performance	62%
Improve academic performance	35%

Q3. Do students see a link between campus life activities and academic engagement or their university experience?

We predicted that if students deemed campus life pursuits as beneficial to either their academic engagement or their university experience, they would have consistently reported an enhancement of their engagement or university experience arising from their student life participation. As illustrated in Table 2, students' subjective perceptions of the impact of campus life activities on academic engagement [$\chi^2(4) = 150.64$, $p < 0.001$] and university experience [$\chi^2(4) = 169.95$, $p < 0.001$] were mixed. Namely, campus life activities were mostly seen as having either no impact or a positive impact.

Q4. Is there an actual link between participation in campus life activities and academic performance (as measured by self-reported GPA)?

We questioned whether students who did not see a link between campus life activities and academic performance failed to acknowledge an actual link. Increased participation in student life pursuits (as measured by self-reported frequency) was not accompanied by a higher or lower GPA [$\chi^2(4) \leq 4.96, ns$]. That is, the reason most students did not see a link between academic performance and campus life pursuits is that the link did not exist. In support of this finding, most students recognized the need for a greater connection between campus life opportunities and class activities (57%) as a tool to enhance their academic performance. The question about students' satisfaction regarding the variety of student life opportunities currently offered led to students being distributed into three groups: 44% were satisfied or very satisfied, 30% were neutral, and 26% were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied.

4. Discussion

The findings of the present investigation can be summarized in three points: First, a large number of students did not participate or rarely participated in campus life events. Second, most students did not see such events as having an impact on their academic performance. Consistent with this view, campus life pursuits were not related to students' self-reported GPA. Third, a considerable number of students perceived campus life events as either beneficial or neutral to their academic engagement and quality of university experience. These findings are inconsistent with those of Kulp et al. (2019) and Mayhew et al. (2016). Taken together, evidence suggests that the unique characteristics of an institution and its student population may be relevant factors in assessing the benefits of campus life activities.

The immediate implications of this action research study were focus-group discussions between faculty members and students ($n = 31$). Students frequently reported that the main culprit for dismal participation in campus life activities was the limited amount of time available outside the classroom. They mentioned completing homework assignments, studying, commuting, and complying with family obligations as absorbing most of their time. Both faculty and students reported the need for planning events outside the classroom that more directly allowed students to practice the learning acquired in the classroom. Another interesting aspect of the present study is that students who had been exposed to inquiry-based learning instruction (Waked et al., 2024) spontaneously offered concrete suggestions on linking classroom instruction with events in the outside world that would offer practice for materials and skills learned in the classroom (e.g., subject-specific fairs). Students also mentioned that their active participation in such events should be reflected in their course grades. The next step of this action research plan is to conduct a pilot study to determine whether addressing both needs can lead to students' improved GPA.

Our action research study has limitations that need to be addressed in future research. For instance, the assessment of the biasing influence of social desirability needs to be determined. A helpful strategy for limiting the biasing effects of social desirability may be to establish rapport (Bergen & Labonté, 2020) through in-depth interviews. In-depth interviews with students may highlight the particular characteristics of campus life activities that are deemed engaging. Furthermore, a larger sample may illustrate individual differences in the student population that may make some activities more or less attractive. Of course, the use of convenience sampling may question the generalizability of the results to students who did not participate (Golzar et al., 2022). Of course, an issue to be explored further is how classroom instructional modes and contents can shape the desire to do more outside the classroom in preparation for a career in one's chosen field. Evidence seems to indicate that learning modes that engage students' critical thinking skills in the classroom can be an effective propeller of change (Al Kuhayli et al., 2021). Another issue to be explored here is the relationship between one's choice of campus life activities and different types of engagement, such as cognitive (investment in learning), emotive (positive affective reactions), and behavioral (effort expended; Al-Obaydi et al., 2023; Li, 2021). How different campus life activities may foster each type of engagement needs to be considered in the decision-making process that governs the selection of suitable activities. Lastly, a survey of the needs of student commuters may suggest helpful changes in the schedules of classes and student life activities for the smooth integration of the two.

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