

# Keeping Students Engaged

by Del Suggs

We hear about student engagement constantly in Higher Ed. Why is engagement considered so important? It's because engagement demonstrates an active involvement in learning. Students who are engaged are taking a pro-active approach to their education. They are more focused on the learning that is taking place.

There has been a massive amount of research done over the last thirty-five years about the impact of engagement on student attrition. Without exception, the studies have all shown that engagement increases retention dramatically. Engagement is basically the difference between a student graduating and dropping out of college. It's that important.

Thanks to the on-going research by the **National Survey on Student Engagement** at Indiana University, we have years of evidence about the value of engagement. In 2008, **Dr. George Kuh** published *High-impact educational practices: What they are, who has access to them, and why they matter*. Dr. Kuh lists the ten most valuable engagement practices.

The ten High Impact Practices defined by Dr. Kuh are all based on the classroom experience, and not the co-curricular world of Student Affairs. And yet, several of the HIPs can well be attained with students working in student activities and student development.

## The 10 High Impact Practices:

1. **First-Year Experience or First-Year Seminars.**
2. **Writing intensive courses**
3. **Diversity/Global Learning**
4. **Common Intellectual experience** (core curriculum)
5. **Undergraduate research**
6. **Capstone courses and projects**

None of these lend themselves to the student life office, at least not in an obvious manner. However, the last few do reach out for inclusion in the student development curriculum.

7. **Internships:** given the high impact of internships, these should be considered for students working with the student activities board.
8. **Collaborative Assignments and projects:** Students working closely on important projects and events are the essence of an effective student activities board. These activities should clearly be transferable.
9. **Learning Communities:** While not a direct comparison to the living-learning communities that are a part of residence life at many colleges, the collaboration that is involved between

members of the student activities board is clearly an apt comparison.

10. **Service Learning:** given the emphasis on community service at most campuses, this HIP is certainly one of the simplest examples of engagement in student activities.

By offering as many of the HIP elements as possible, the student activities office can be a strong force in student engagement.

## Organization Involvement

Communities of practice, organizations, and clubs on campus are another powerful force for engagement. We should be working to increase the number of students involved with these groups, and provide high levels of support to ensure their success.

1. **Have an Activities / Involvement / Club Fair** at the very beginning of each term. At these events, clubs can inform students about their activities and goals, and recruit new members.
2. **Increase the number of clubs and organizations** on campus by providing support and guidance. Foster a nurturing environment for new clubs to flourish.

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- 3. Provide and require officer training** for students to assure that clubs function effectively. Also provide Advisor training, as effective advisors are essential to a campus organization survival.
- 4. Recognize and value involvement.** Create awards and prizes for active and successful involvement.
- 5. Promote a co-curricular transcript.** While this listing of student involvement is become more visible with every year, it is still uncommon. It provides strong encouragement to be involved on campus, and is a valuable marketing resource for job-seekers.

## Increasing Campus Engagement

Getting students to attend and engage in activities and events is a struggle at nearly every college. While SABs work to up attendance, there are multiple ways to get more students engaged.

- 1. More, smaller events.** Many schools are locked in the practice of presenting large events such as concerts and festivals. Perhaps a more effective way to reach more students is to present multiple smaller

events. By offering smaller programs at various times and locations, the SAB has the ability to reach more students.

- 2. Targeted audiences:** presenting multiple programs enables the student activities office to reach more specific audience, such as non-traditional students, returning students, families, first-generation students, and more.
- 3. More interactive events:** rather than continue the traditional student activities offerings, perhaps SABs should present more interactive programs. Fewer concerts and comedians, and more karioke, open mics and poetry jams.
- 4. Support for Residence Life programs.** As students in residence halls have the opportunity of pursue more of the High-impact Practices, the student life office should be supportive of these programs.
- 5. More learning-based programs and events:** there are many opportunities for student activities offices to present entertaining educational programs, There are a vast number of entertaining speakers,

films, comedians, spoken word artists and more. Student activities can truly be co-curricular

- 6. Create student learning outcomes** for all programs and events. It isn't difficult to demonstrate the contribution of activities and programs to the educational mission of the campus.
- 7. Create a culture of engagement.** Requiring ID card swipes to attend events is not unusual. Take it a step further and have students respond to assessment surveys when they attend events. By making it a positive experience, recruiting champions to make assessment the norm, and providing positive reinforcement (rewards) can all generate a culture of engagement.
- 8. Embrace your role as an educator** on campus. Remember "Learning Reconsidered" and understand that your contribution to student development is vital. Don't neglect your job as a teacher.

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