



Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](#)

Journal of Hospitality, Leisure, Sport & Tourism Education

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jhlste



Academic Papers

Academic engagement of hospitality students

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Academic engagement
Curriculum
Education
Study habits

ABSTRACT

Student academic engagement has been researched over the years, drawing limited conclusions and suggestions for improvement. In this study, researchers utilized National Survey for Student Engagement data from a large Midwestern university to examine the academic engagement of hospitality management students and compared their engagement to business students. It was found that 50% of the participating hospitality students spent 11 h or more each week preparing for classes. For both groups, finances were reported as the biggest obstacle to academic progress. The research study provides an examination of hospitality students' academic engagement. Suggestions are presented for hospitality educators.

Published by Elsevier Ltd.

1. Introduction

Educators, irrespective of discipline, want their students to be academically engaged. The definition for academic engagement incorporates all aspects of a student's schooling, including: class attendance, assignment completion, classmate interaction, and outside influences. Student engagement, in both the academic and social aspects of college experiences, provides a reflection of the university experience and program delivery, and may influence early career earnings (Hu & Wolniak, 2010). College students' level of academic engagement has been debated at various universities and colleges, across academic disciplines. Kuh (2003) explained that without an understanding of student engagement and behavior, colleges and universities are making judgments on their effectiveness without knowing anything about the students' experiences. Recently, Arum and Roksa in their book, *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campus*, addressed the academic engagement challenge utilizing results from a large-scale nationwide study.

Many college students today lack strong literacy skills and necessary focus (Arum & Roksa, 2011), are viewed by faculty as unmotivated or under-motivated (McFarlane, 2010), and are challenged to express themselves in large group settings (Mulryan-Kyne, 2010). No known studies have assessed academic engagement of hospitality management students and then compared their engagement to others. Although, some researchers have examined closely related topics such as general academic studies (Morrison & O'Gorman, 2008), necessary career preparation (Chen & Gursoy, 2007), and program quality (Hornig, Teng, & Baum, 2008).

Beyond the academic and curricular issues, industry issues (limited basic skills and lack of experience) have been noted in the research. Tesone (2002) found that undergraduates often are not fully prepared for entry-level positions following

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graduation due to the gap between education (curriculum-based) and hospitality practice (experience-based). Students who struggle with academic engagement may encounter problems in the workplace and therefore, future implications for the hospitality industry must be considered. [Alonso and O'Neill \(2011\)](#) reported challenges noted by small business owners in finding quality employees regardless of their geographic proximity to a major college campus; generally, these challenges included a lack of basic skills, bad attitude, and poor work ethic. Aspects such as work ethic and integrity, time management and organization, and communication skills, in addition to the knowledge base developed in classes, are some of the skills developed through coursework and then transferred to a professional career ([Alonso & O'Neill, 2011](#)).

The purpose of this study was to determine hospitality students' level of academic engagement as related to study habits, classroom participation, and assignment requirements. Additionally, the academic engagement aspects identified in the study were utilized to compare hospitality students to business students. The comparisons of hospitality students and business students were done to understand student engagement on a broader level and to allow for hospitality students to be compared to other students who are exposed to similar learning outcomes and develop similar positive traits. Using data from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), hospitality management students were compared to students majoring in business (management, marketing, and finance), as the latter provides the most similar comparisons across academic disciplines. Specifically, the study was established to initially determine hospitality students' academic engagement, consisting of time spent on academic tasks, study habits, and exposure to curricular components within higher education.

2. Literature review

2.1. Student engagement

[Arum and Roksa \(2011\)](#) reported that students are generally entering college campuses, around the country, academically adrift from the requirements, demands, and future direction of their majors and future careers. [Meyer, Spencer, and French \(2009\)](#) found 32% of college students surveyed reported the demands of college academics were easier than they anticipated before beginning college. However, student lack of college preparation, poor writing, and literacy skills often force adjustments in curriculum delivery, general rigor, and academic expectations of professors ([Schnee, 2008](#)). Faculty members often contend with student challenges such as lack of maturity, low reading level, substandard academic background, and lack of direction ([McFarlane, 2010](#)). "Many students come to college not only poorly prepared by prior schooling for highly demanding academic tasks that ideally lie in front of them, but more troubling still they enter college with attitudes, norms, values, and behaviors that are often at odds with academic commitment" ([Arum and Roksa, 2011](#), p. 3). The challenges facing academic institutions today cannot be blamed solely on student behaviors; the nature of the modern collegiate classroom may also be increasing these challenges; for example, the trend toward larger class sizes can create challenges in learning and communication between students and faculty ([Mulryan-Kyne, 2010](#)).

[Arum and Roksa \(2011\)](#) examined undergraduate student academic engagement in a nationwide study focused on developing skills in critical thinking, complex reasoning, and writing. The study included standardized testing assessments using the Collegiate Learning Assessment combined with transcript reviews, student survey responses, and a follow up study with the original participants. All of the participants' (2322 students from 24 four-year institutions) data were compiled as the Determinants of College Learning ([Arum & Roksa, 2011](#)). [Arum and Roksa \(2011\)](#) found 68% of students from highly selective universities were given both reading and writing assignments in the previous semester, compared to students at selective and less selective institutions (37% and 31% respectively). This disparity potentially places students at a disadvantage, dependent on institution type, depriving them of developing a skill-set needed for advanced academic challenges. If students are not completing significant reading and writing tasks, "It is probably unreasonable to expect them to develop skills to improve on performance tasks that require critical thinking, complex reasoning, and written communication" ([Arum & Roksa, 2011](#), p. 73).

[Wyatt, Saunders, and Zelmer \(2005\)](#) explored differences in beliefs regarding academic rigor and engagement held by students and faculty. Faculty and students, at one university in the Midwestern United States, were surveyed; 89 faculty responded (36% response rate) and 108 student responded (31% response rate). Discrepancies between student and faculty responses were found; only 22% of faculty participants reported their students were achieving academic potential, however the majority of students (69%) reported they were achieving their full academic potential ([Wyatt et al., 2005](#)). Often discrepancies, like this, lead to potential academic challenges between faculty and students, which may result in student engagement issues. In another study, [Meyer et al. \(2009\)](#) compared first-year college students' perceptions of the academic realities they faced. Fifty-two freshmen students were interviewed and asked to report their perceptions of, and experiences with, college academics. All 52 respondents expected that college academics would be very demanding, citing information from the media, family, friends, and high school teachers. However, 60% of the respondents reported their college academic experiences were easier than expected.

Given the diversity of students, each may view curriculum as easy or challenging whereby each viewpoint could lead to lack of engagement by the student in a particular course or program. The challenge for educators is to ensure a balanced curriculum for different students, realizing some flourish while others struggle with academic demands and college life adjustments ([Meyer et al., 2009](#)).

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