The Importance of Student Engagement and Experiential Learning in Undergraduate Education

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Abstract

Student engagement is among the essential elements in retention programs for undergraduate students1-6. Studies illustrate that if students do not perceive a sense of belonging, they are at greater risk of departing their institution prior to completing their degree programs. Recognized as a high impact practice, undergraduate research and other forms of experiential learning have been proven to impart the greatest impacts toward the promotion of student engagement7, 8. Herein we underscore the importance of student engagement and experiential learning in undergraduate education.

Introduction

Student engagement[1-6] and a sense of belonging[9-14] have been well documented as critical contributors toward successful student retention programs. Higher education research indicates that when students do not perceive a sense of belonging or feel engaged, there is a significantly lower rate of retention. Experiential learning opportunities, such as mentored inquiry, are recognized among the high impact practices with the greatest efficacy among types of programs that seek to engage undergraduates[7,8]. From improving self-efficacy[15-20] to students' sense of belonging[9-14], experiential learning has been repeatedly proven among positive predictors of academic success, retention, and career success/satisfaction.

Discussion

Experiential learning supports the development of practical problem-solving skills[21-23]. The application of theory, from the classroom, afforded by mentored inquiry improves academic performance and students' ability to define career goals[21]. With experiential learning, undergraduates' regular interface and solutions to real-world issues, followed by contemplation and deliberation related to the results of their decisions, facilitate the growth and development of their understanding associated with their disciplines[9]. Experiential learning is especially appropriate for connecting complex issues across disciplines[9,10]. The significance of student interactions with faculty mentors as a method of nurturing student engagement through mentored inquiry is being highlighted among best practices for student engagement and retention initiatives[1-6]. Once restricted primarily to STEM and a subset of social science disciplines, experiential learning and other forms of student engagement are now recognized as essential elements of all undergraduate education. In the past decade experiential learning has been integrated across the breadth of academic disciplines, and the early results are just the tip of the iceberg.

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