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The Relationship Between College Student Involvement, Investment, and Satisfaction

Sarah Maurer

Hanover College

Independent Study

Abstract

It has been assumed that college student involvement in extracurricular activities benefits the student by making him or her a more well-rounded individual. Recent studies have also shown that student involvement can benefit an institution by improving retention. Research has not been conducted on the specific aspects of involvement that lead to these positive effects. “Rusbult’s Investment Model” argues that satisfaction with an organization is dependent on the extent to which a person is invested in the organization—i.e., the organization offers high rewards and low costs. The present study elaborates on this model by hypothesizing that greater involvement and greater investment in the college will be related to a student’s satisfaction in their undergraduate experience. An e-mail with a link to an online questionnaire was sent to all students at a small liberal arts undergraduate college. This questionnaire asked about student involvement in co-curricular activities, their investment in the college, and their overall satisfaction with their undergraduate experience. Correlational analyses are used to examine the relationships between student involvement, investment in the school, and satisfaction with the college experience. While involvement does not have an effect on the levels of student investment or satisfaction, there is a significant positive correlation between levels of student investment with levels of student satisfaction. The implications of these findings for Student Life professionals are discussed.

Introduction

On a humid afternoon in August, a few hundred of Hanover College's newest students are ushered into a dimly lit gymnasium. Tables and tables are arranged around this large room, staffed by older students whose goal for the day is to recruit as many of these fresh faces as possible for their student organization. By the end of the short time these new students have spent in this room, they are on the e-mail lists of dozens of clubs. Some of these they will be active in throughout their college career, while others will simply be sending them fruitless reminder e-mails for the next four years.

A basic part of any freshman orientation program is an activities fair, where campus organizations and activities gather to recruit the incoming students for the coming years. Student involvement in extracurricular activities has long been encouraged because it is assumed that not only involved students, but also the institution itself, gain many benefits from these activities. Not only does involvement in extracurricular activities and organizations help broaden a student's experiences, but recent studies have shown that increased student involvement can increase a student's satisfaction with their collegiate experience, and as a result, increase a school's retention rate.

It is vitally important for schools to be examining the levels of student satisfaction, since it is these levels that play a large role in student success. Alexander Astin (1993) writes, "Given the considerable investment of time and energy that most students make in attending college, their perceptions of the value of that experience should be given substantial weight. Indeed, it is difficult to argue that student satisfaction can be legitimately subordinated to any other educational outcome." In Astin's studies,

there is a remarkably strong association between student satisfaction and rates of retention. That is, the higher levels of satisfaction that are at an institution, the higher that institution's retention is likely to be (Astin, 1993).

There are a variety of different factors to consider when examining what increases student satisfaction. These include the amount of interaction with faculty, the quality of educational and residential facilities, amount of campus diversity, etc. However, two themes that keep recurring in past research when measuring student satisfaction levels are sense of community and amount of student-student interaction (Astin, 1993). Much of this student-student interaction on campuses occurs from becoming involved in the campus community outside of the classroom. Students interact more with other students through events sponsored by residence halls or by joining various clubs and taking part in activities sponsored by those clubs. Through these organizations and activities, students form friendships and bonds with other students that are different from the relationships established within the classroom.

There have been several studies performed in recent years to show how greater involvement in extracurricular activities and organizations, as well as the overall campus community lead to higher satisfaction with one's college experience. Abrahamowicz (1988) predicted that members of student organizations would be more involved, show greater satisfaction, and have more positive perceptions of their college experience than students who were not members. This was found to be true, the largest differences in responses being found in interpersonal areas of the students' lives. Abrahamowicz explains that according to his results, "students who were members of student organizations seemed to have connected with their university in a special way," evident

in the degree and variety of student involvement (Abramowicz, 1988).

Other researchers have done extensive research to find ways in which involvement in different types of activities or organizations could increase a student's satisfaction with their college experience. For example, participation in athletics was found not only to have a positive effect on a student's satisfaction in college, but also increased the likelihood that the student would be more socially active in college (Pascarella and Smart, 1991). Participation in a Greek organization has also been shown to have a significant positive effect on a student's satisfaction with their college experience (Pennington, Zvonkovic, & Wilson, 1989).

Astin (1984) has explored different areas which could increase the level of a student's involvement. Not only would participating in more activities and organizations increase involvement, but so would holding offices in those organizations as well as the factor of residing in campus-provided housing. In fact, students who resided in campus housing were also much more likely to be more satisfied with their overall undergraduate experience (Astin, 1973).

Astin's work states that by becoming active in various extracurricular activities and in the campus community, students also experience a form of cathexis – an investment of psychological energy – to their college experience (Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991). Because students are investing more of themselves in their undergraduate experience, they are likely to look back on their years in college with a higher degree of satisfaction. Ultimately, this process of investing the self into the overall undergraduate experience may actually be more integral to the level of satisfaction felt than the student's level of involvement itself.

In considering the aspect of student investment, the present study is primarily grounded in Rusbult's Investment Model (1983), which states that satisfaction with an organization or relationship is greater to the extent that the organization offers high rewards and low costs. Further, commitment to the organization is said to increase with increases in rewards, decreases in costs, and increases in investment size (Rusbult and Farrell, 1983). The model also acknowledges that the impact of investment should change over time. That is, since investments tend to accumulate over time, the individual should become more committed over a period of time (Rusbult and Farrell, 1983). This model was originally applied to study job commitment (Rusbult and Farrell, 1983), and satisfaction and commitment in relationships (Rusbult, Johnson, & Morrow, 1986).

Hatcher, Kryter, Prus, and Fitzgerald (1992) took Rusbult's Investment Model and applied it to college student investment. The study, performed at a largely residential college, was divided into two phases. In the first phase, a sample of students came up with concrete examples of rewards, costs, alternatives, and investments associated with college. In the second phase, the concrete items generated by the first phase are used to teach the concepts of the Investment Model to a new sample of students, who then completed the measures of the Investment Model. Hatcher and colleagues (1992) found consistency with Rusbult's model, in that greater investment in one's college experience contributed to a higher satisfaction with the college experience, as well as a greater commitment to the institution in general.

Based on this previous research, this study will further explore the relationships between student involvement, student investment, student satisfaction, and the effect that they have on the college experience, using Hanover College as a case study. Hanover is a

small liberal arts undergraduate institution in rural Indiana, which hosts a student population of about 1,000 students, the large majority of whom live on campus. In recent years a main topic of discussion among students, faculty, and administration has been the rates of student retention, which is not as high as the institution considers satisfactory. As a result, a case study of this type is appropriate in order to explore possible ways of increasing student retention by improving students' overall satisfaction and investment.

Three main hypotheses will be tested in this study. First, involvement will be related to investment. A student who is more involved in extracurricular activities and organizations will report being more invested in their overall undergraduate experience. Second, involvement will be related to satisfaction. A student who is more involved in activities and organizations will follow the previous research in this area and also be more satisfied with their college experience. Finally, investment will be related to satisfaction. The third hypothesis – that investment will be positively correlated with satisfaction – is considered to be the key hypothesis within all of the variables. That is, students who are not very involved, yet are highly invested in their college experiences, will still be highly satisfied with their overall college experiences. On the other hand, no matter how involved other students may be, if they are not invested in their overall undergraduate experiences, they will not be very satisfied with those experiences.

Methods

Participants

The link to an online survey was sent to all Hanover College students in the weekly e-newsletter from the Student Life Office (see Appendix). The participants who responded to the survey consisted of 125 students, or approximately 12% of the student

population. Of these 125 participants, 23% were male and 76% were female. The participants also consisted of 19% first-year students, 27% sophomores, 32% juniors, and 22% seniors.

The vast majority of participants reported being involved on campus in some form or another – the most common activities listed included athletics (49.6% of participants) and Greek life (48.8% of participants).

Procedure

An online survey (see Appendix) was written by the researcher. This survey was based on previous studies, but because the complete measures were unavailable, the researcher built the study upon example questions provided from those previous measures. The survey consisted of five main sections: demographics, level of involvement, level of investment, level of satisfaction, and open-ended questions.

Demographic information collected included graduation year, cumulative GPA, place of residence, and gender.

In the involvement section, students were asked to list their extracurricular organizations and activities, and specify whether or not they had held an office in that activity. In order to analyze each students' involvement, organizations and activities were ranked on a five-point scale, determined by how often they met and the time commitment required of each. If the student specified holding an office, a point was added to the organization or activity's rank. The sum of the students' activities resulted in their total involvement score. Only college-recognized activities and organizations were counted for this score. Employees of the College's Office of Student Life reviewed the involvement scale and approved of its weightings.

The investment items were designed to measure a student's overall investment in their college experience by asking them on a Likert scale how much they felt like they would lose upon withdrawal, as well as how much they felt that they gained from being enrolled in main areas of their lives. These areas consisted of: friends and social life, extracurricular activities and organizations, faculty as mentors, educational benefit, preparation for future career, and financial resources. Overall, this section had a Cronbach's alpha of 0.71. To convert the data from this section into analyzable data, each participant was given a total investment score, which was calculated as the mean of all of their responses to the investment questions.

The satisfaction section of the survey contained items designed to measure the level of a students' satisfaction with their overall college experience. This section included items such as, "Knowing what you do now, how likely would you be to enroll at Hanover again?" The responses were on a 5-point Likert scale, 1 being "Not at all likely," to 5 being "Very likely." This section was given a Cronbach's alpha of 0.80.

Results

Descriptive results of the data collected revealed a wide range of responses in each of the variables. Most noticeable was the difference in involvement scores. The minimum involvement score was 0, which reflected those few students who did not report involvement in any extracurricular activities. The maximum involvement score was 45, which was given by a student who likely listed every activity they had been involved in since arriving at Hanover. The mean for this section, however, was 10.86 with a standard deviation of 6.27, and with most scores clustered around the 10-15 range. The total investment scores ranged from 2.00 to 4.75, with a mean score of 3.57, and a

standard deviation of 0.545. Finally, responses for the satisfaction question of “Knowing what you know now, how likely would you be to enroll at Hanover again?” ranged the entire scale, the lowest response being 1, and the highest response being 5. The average response for this item was 3.59, with a standard deviation of 1.288.

Correlational analyses were run to examine the relationships between each of the three main variables. There was not a significant correlation between involvement and investment ($r(125) = -0.08, p = .41$).

When primary analyses were run using the satisfaction scale, there was not a significant correlation between satisfaction and a student’s involvement ($r(125) = -0.052, p = .566$); however, there was a significant positive correlation between satisfaction and investment ($r(125) = 0.658, p = .00$).

Upon analysis of the satisfaction scale, there was a concern that the scale as a whole was too similar to the investment scale. In order to capture what was believed to be the best representation of students’ overall feelings of satisfaction with their college experience, the satisfaction ratings were changed to the students’ responses to the question, “Knowing what you do now, how likely would you be to enroll at Hanover again?”

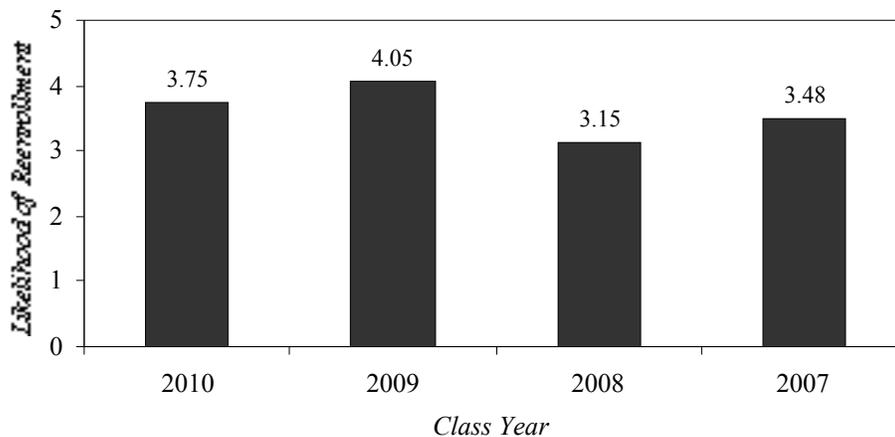
With this item used as the satisfaction data, there was again not a significant correlation between involvement and satisfaction ($r(125) = -0.05, p = .57$).

However, the third and key hypothesis was supported again when a significant positive correlation was found between the variables of investment and satisfaction ($r(125) = 0.66, p = 0.00$).

In analyzing additional factors against these three variables, it was found that

neither the student's place of residence nor their GPA had an effect on their involvement, investment, or satisfaction. Likewise, the genders were spread evenly across all variables. Further analysis of the students' involvement showed that the type of activity students were involved in (Greek organization, athletics, service organization, etc.) also did not play a role in affecting the students' overall satisfaction or investment in their college experiences.

An interesting difference to note is the difference between classes in response to the question, "Knowing what you do now, how likely would you be to enroll at Hanover again?" This question also reflects the overall satisfaction level of the classes. The differences between classes in their reported likelihood to reenroll was significant, $F(3, 120) = 3.363, p=.021$. The junior class responded the lowest, with an average response of 3.15 (see Figure 1). The sophomore class was the most likely to reenroll, with an average response of 4.05. The same pattern was reflected in the investment and overall



satisfaction scores, though not as strong.

Figure 1. Average responses to the question, "Knowing what you know now, how likely would you be to enroll at Hanover again?" grouped by class.

Discussion

It is important to note the confirmation of the key hypothesis in this study with the significant positive correlation between level of satisfaction and level of investment in the college experience. This finding confirms the aforementioned thought that psychological investment in one's college career is indeed more important than simple involvement in extra-curricular activities and organizations. Furthermore, these findings confirm Rusbult's theory that satisfaction with an institution increases to the extent that the institution offers high rewards (Rusbult & Farrell, 1983). Students who see their experience at Hanover as returning high rewards (that is, they are invested in it) are also highly satisfied with the experience.

Interestingly, the findings showed that involvement had no role in the levels of investment and satisfaction. These findings go against all previous research, and must be investigated further. It is very possible that, being a case study, these findings were produced as a result of the population from which they were taken. Hanover is a largely residential campus, and the sheer nature of a residential campus is to require all students to be involved in one form or another in the campus community, even if not through formal routes such as college-recognized clubs and organizations. For example, students who may believe that they are too busy with schoolwork to be involved in any additional organizations may still very likely join in a pick-up game of Ultimate Frisbee on the quad, and thus form friendships in which to invest time and energy. Other students may spend considerable time working with faculty in order to create and work through Directed Studies, and consequently invest a great deal of energy into their undergraduate experience through these academic opportunities.

There are other thoughts that need to be taken into consideration when applying these findings to the population from which they are gathered. When looking at the differences between classes and whether or not they would reenroll, one notices that the trends do not follow Rusbult's theory that longer time in a relationship or institution increases an individual's investment, and by doing so, also increases their satisfaction with the relationship or institution (Rusbult & Farrell, 1983). However, it is important to note that the junior class is the first class that came in under a completely new academic plan. Likewise, the senior class experienced the sudden transition between the two academic plans. Part of their dissatisfaction may be caused from the process that comes from working out the "kinks" in a new academic system. When comparing the sophomore and first-year classes, however, Rusbult's theory does hold true that the sophomores, who have been in the campus community longer, are more invested and consequently, more satisfied with their overall college experience.

In future research, it would be helpful if a more accurate form of measuring student involvement could be researched and applied. Any college student will say that it is extremely difficult to tell from an outsider's perspective how much time an activity requires, and adding to the difficulty is analyzing this time with other activities.

Likewise, as anyone who has held any type of leadership position would agree, some offices held have many more responsibilities than others, and this is not always visible looking at simply the title. A more concrete measure of student involvement could be extremely useful for the field of Student Life as a whole.

Finally, investigating the level of investment students hold in their particular activities would also be interesting to compare to overall college satisfaction levels.

Perhaps students don't necessarily simply need to get involved to feel satisfied with their college experience – it may be more important for a student to become involved in organizations and causes that they feel passionately about. By doing this, students would be more invested in not only the institution that they attend, but also their activities within that institution.

However, even beyond these few exceptions, the findings from this study clearly indicate that involvement does not seem to play as integral a role in student satisfaction than may have been previously thought. Not only might it be insignificant to be pressuring students to join any club or activity that seems remotely interesting to them, but we might actually be doing students a disservice by promoting sheer numbers of activity. Those students in the activities fair that sign up for dozens of clubs and then actually follow through on their commitment to several of them may find themselves stretched too thin during their upperclassmen years and become burnt out, consequently damaging their overall satisfaction with their experience.

The findings from this study indicate that it is critical for students to be invested in the institution and their undergraduate experience as a whole in order to produce the higher rates of satisfaction predicted earlier in this study. A consideration Student Life professionals, both at Hanover and at other institutions, should take from this study is to explore ways which they can help their students connect on a more deeper level to the institution and become invested in both that institution and their overall experience. Perhaps this can be through getting to know a student and connecting them with an organization in which they can become a leader and to which they can devote their passion and energy. Or maybe this would involve helping them find an academic major

that they are excited about, and introducing them to a professor in that field that can become a mentor and help them become more involved in the department and the student's academic experience itself. Taking time to teach incoming classes about campus history and traditions, letting them feel that they are a part of something greater, and letting them know that they too have the power to impact and improve this greater whole would also enable students to become more invested in their collegiate experience, and consequently become increasingly more satisfied with the experience. Rather than pushing involvement in any shape or form, professionals should consider ways to help students become passionate about their undergraduate experience and want to invest more of themselves in the campus community and the institution itself. The findings of this study indicate that by doing this, students' satisfaction with their collegiate experience will also increase.

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Appendix

Message sent in Student Life E-Newsletter

Hi Students!

My name is Sarah Maurer and I am a senior Psychology major working on my Independent Study. I am studying the effects of student involvement in extracurricular activities. I'm asking you to please participate! Please go to <http://psych.hanover.edu/research/SeniorProjects/2007/Maurer/> and fill out the short questionnaire. It will only take a few minutes, and since my project is limited to Hanover students, I need as many participants as possible! I'm also hoping that with the results of my project, I will be able to propose ideas to the administration on how to improve student life at Hanover, so your participation would be very helpful! Thank you for your time, and don't hesitate to contact me if you have any questions!

Thank you,
Sarah Maurer
maurers@hanover.edu

Informed Consent Form

This research is being conducted by Sarah Maurer, a senior psychology major at Hanover College. The questionnaire you are asked to answer is designed to examine effects of college student involvement in extracurricular activities. After you are finished answering all the questions, you will be debriefed.

The entire experiment will not take more than 15 minutes. There are no known risks involved in being in this study, beyond those of everyday life. The information you provide during the experiment is completely anonymous; at no time will your name be associated with the responses you give.

If you have any questions about the questionnaire or this study, please contact Sarah Maurer at maurers@hanover.edu or Dr. Stephen Dine Young, supervising faculty, at youngst@hanover.edu.

By clicking the link below, you are giving your consent to participate in this study.

28. What advice would you give to an incoming freshman to help them become a part of the campus community?

29. Anything else you would like to add?

Debriefing Form

The questionnaire that you just completed is studying the effects of Hanover student involvement on satisfaction with the college experience. The researcher is predicting that a greater level of student involvement will lead to a higher level of investment in one's undergraduate experience and as a result, greater satisfaction with the college experience. Once the study is completed, you may view the results at <http://psych.hanover.edu>. If you have any questions, you may contact Sarah Maurer (maurers@hanover.edu) or Dr. Stephen Dine Young (youngst@hanover.edu).