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The relationship of accreditation and student engagement in a college of business: An internal, multi-year comparison of high impact practices

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ABSTRACT

This study examines a college of business at a regional university, according to High Impact Practices on the National Survey of Student Engagement as compared to student engagement at the regional university as a whole. Seven years of data across five High Impact Practices for both the college of business as well as its greater regional university were examined using a two-proportion z-test. The study concluded that the college of business was more stable than the greater university across four of the High Impact Practices. This study reveals that a college of business may function as an independent entity from its greater university concerning High Impact Practice participation which may be contextualized by the accreditation process. Specifically, the unique attributes of programmatic accreditation, as opposed to the institutional accreditation that all colleges and programs within a university must satisfy, may change behaviors related to student engagement.

1. Introduction

It is widely accepted that universities should “look for changes in the way their current students are engaged, some track possible trends, and others evaluate specific campus initiatives” (NSSE, 2016c, p. 1). Specifically, a college of business within a greater university often faces unique challenges and engages in independent initiatives. These initiatives produce outcomes that should be monitored and reported. Much of university-specific research has been conducted on student engagement (Altbach, Resiberg, & Rumbley, 2009; Astin, 1996; Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2006). However, there has been little investigation into the reported differences in student engagement within a college of business as opposed to its greater university, especially when that college must adhere to additional and/or differing accreditation standards. The current study seeks to fill this gap. For this study, a comparison of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) results regarding High Impact Practices (HIP) at a regional university, West Texas A&M University (WTAMU), and its college of business (COB) was conducted. This study illustrates how student engagement may differ between a college of business and its greater university as well as how these differences may be contextualized with accreditation.

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1.1. Literature review

As the current study seeks to investigate relationships concerning student engagement as measured by the NSSE, a review of relevant literature concerning both topics is offered to establish pertinent background.

1.2. Accreditation

Higher educational accreditation within the United States functions to ensure quality in terms of academic processes, achievements and learning (DoE, 2016c). In order to achieve and maintain accreditation, universities and colleges must indicate a clear mission and goals. This ensures long-term improvement as well as allowing institutions to meet basic standards established by accrediting bodies (Author, 2015). With the massification of higher education, the impact of accreditation may become more important in terms of an institution's attractiveness to stakeholders (Altbach et al., 2009). Massification has led to increased competition for those in pursuit of higher education, but accreditation provides the unique opportunity for higher educational institutions to legitimize claims about quality education (Author, 2014).

Roller, Andrews, and Bovee (2003) state that primary reasons for pursuing accreditation are marketing and competitiveness. For example, AACSB is a well-known and respected accreditation body for business schools (Hunt, 2015; White et al., 2008; Lindsay & Campbell, 2003; Jantzen, 2000). Associating with this accrediting body within the system of higher education may legitimize and improve the reputation of institutions (Hunt, 2015). Through this differentiation in quality, universities with accreditation may provide better assurance of learning for university stakeholders (AACSB, 2016b). One of these differentiating factors may be student engagement.

Within the United States, there are 15 regional or national accrediting bodies that award accreditation at the institutional level (DoE, 2016b). Institutional accreditation recognizes a university for meeting the accrediting body's quality assurance standards (DoE, 2016c). West Texas A&M University (WTAMU), the university examined within this study, has been institutionally accredited by the Southern Association of Schools and Colleges (SACSCOC) since approximately 1925 (DoE, 2016a).

There are also many accrediting bodies in the United States which award accreditation at the programmatic/specialized level, or to colleges, departments, or entities that focus on education in specific industries (DoE, 2016c). The College of Business, a subset of and college within WTAMU as examined within this study, has been accredited by the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) since 2012.

1.3. Student engagement

Engagement is a relatively new concept within academic literature, but it is a focus for many higher educational accrediting bodies. Specifically, SACSCOC (2012) believes that, "Accreditation requires institutional commitment and engagement" (p. 3). Similarly, according to the AACSB (2016b), "quality business education cannot be achieved when either academic or professional engagement is absent" (p. 2). The concept of engagement has been shown to serve as a key control in attitudes, behavior, and performance of individuals in order to improve educational outcomes (Ariani, 2015; Bates, 2004; Harter, Schmidt, & Hayes, 2002; Richman, 2006).

Astin's theory of student involvement posits that an involved student is one who "devotes considerable energy to studying, spends much time on campus, participates actively in student organizations, and interacts frequently with faculty members" (Astin, 1984, p. 292). Astin (1996) defines involvement as the investment of student mental and physical energy into their academic endeavors. Astin (1999) further asserts that the amount of effort in student engagement is directly related to the overall educational growth and student experiences (Kuh et al., 2006). In Astin's theory, the most persuasive types of involvement center on similar student organization activities and student leadership opportunities as AACSB (AACSB, 2016b). According to AACSB's most recent accreditation documents, "Student academic and professional engagement occurs when students are actively involved in their education experiences, in both academic and professional settings, and when they are able to connect these experiences in meaningful ways," (AACSB, 2016b, p. 38). Therefore, accreditation and student engagement are closely related.

1.4. The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE)

The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) is commonly used to measure improvement and trends in student involvement. The NSSE is an annual survey that collects information from first-year and graduating senior students about their undergraduate educational experiences (NSSE, 2016a). The survey specifically assesses the extent to which students engage in learning activities typically associated with increased student retention, persistence, and satisfaction (Kuh et al., 2006).

High Impact Practices (HIP) within the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) are defined as:

"... enriching educational experiences that can be life-changing. They typically demand considerable time and effort, facilitate learning outside of the classroom, require meaningful interactions with faculty and other students, encourage collaboration with diverse others, and provide frequent and substantive feedback" (NSSE, 2015, p. 1).

HIPs relate to measuring student engagement and include participation in (1) learning communities, (2) internships, (3) study abroad, (4) student research with faculty, (5) a culminating senior experience, and (6) service-learning (NSSE, 2015). The current study utilizes these HIPs to measure trends in student engagement at WTAMU as compared to the COB.

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