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The missing link in college student engagement research: What students want from their learning experience

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Abstract

The behavioral model underpinning national surveys of university students' engagement (e.g., NSSE, AUSSE, UKES) considers students' experiences but neglects their motivation. We surveyed undergraduates ($N=1,772$) about what they wanted from their university experience and how that has turned out. Using thematic analyses, the most common codes were *explore subject* (20% of students), *apply learning* (16%), *nonspecific* (12%), *grow as person* (11.5%), *explore and apply* (10%), *interact with peers* (8%) and *interact with staff* (4%). Findings showed significantly fewer black and minority ethnic (BME) students expressing *explore subject* and more BME students preferring *apply learning* experiences than white students. Students with *explore subject*, *explore and apply* hopes, or desire for *grow as person* tended to report their hopes fulfilled. Implications for research and practice are discussed.

Objectives

Through surveys of engagement like the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and its offsprings, such as the UK Engagement Survey (UKES), we have a growing body of knowledge on students' experiences and outcomes (Anderson, Anson, Gonyea, & Paine, 2016; Brownell & Swaner, 2010; Carini, Kuh, & Klein, 2006; Kuh, 2008; Kuh, 2009; Miller, Rocconi, & Dumford, 2018). However, the behavioral model of student engagement underpinning these surveys considers students' actions and self-assessed skills but neglects motivational constructs such as students' values and goals (Kahu, 2013). Thus we know little about what students want from and value about their learning experiences in higher education, though their goals likely influence their behavioral engagement, and opportunities to realize their goals also likely influence persistence (Kuh, 2016).

The present study aimed to address that gap by asking undergraduates to describe in their own words what they wanted from their university experience (i.e., "hopes") and the extent to which those hopes had been fulfilled. We sought to understand the demographic and environmental variables associated with different categories of hopes and what variables were associated with whether those hopes had been fulfilled.

Prior Research

Students are increasingly being cast as consumerist, more focused on "having" a degree than the process of learning (Molesworth, Nixon, & Scullion, 2009). This assumption underpins recent research on student expectations (e.g. Balloo, 2017) and entitlement (Kopp, Zinn, Finney, & Jurich, 2011), which emphasize how much effort students expect to invest, rather than their desires. There is also a body of research in educational psychology on mastery goals versus performance goals as predictors of students' performance (e.g., Harackiewicz, Barron, Tauer, & Elliot, 2002), which is, itself, a subset of broader debates about intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation (Sansone & Harackiewicz, 2000). With few exceptions (e.g. Braskamp, 2009; Kahu,

2013), motivation research is siloed from higher education student engagement research. Motivation research, though, typically relies upon pre-defined psychological constructs, asking students to respond to a set of generic motivation-related items, rather than seeking to understand individual motivations or hopes for their learning experiences on students' own terms.

Conceptual Framework

Kahu's (2013) integrated model of student engagement attempted to bring together research on student engagement (NSSE/UKES) with motivation theory. Although motivation is postulated as a factor that shapes students' behavioral engagement, that construct needs further definition. Eccles's expectancy-value theory (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000) distinguishes between three main types of subjective values that are foundational to motivated behavior: a) intrinsic value, the interest in and enjoyment of doing an activity such as learning in university; b) attainment value or the personal importance of achieving an outcome; and c) utility value, the extent to which an activity is deemed useful to a broader goal. The present study aims to better understand what students want from their learning experiences in higher education and how that affects their assessments of their experience. We investigate emergent categories of motivation but discuss them relative to the *a priori* categories considered in expectancy-value theory.

Research Questions

First we investigated students' hopes for their overall learning experience in higher education. We hypothesized that some students would describe intrinsic values expressed as interest in and enjoyment of learning or learning a subject for its own sake, while some would emphasize attainment value related to career preparation, and others would emphasize utility values related to relevance of the subject matter to non-job-related real-world applications. Based on the research underpinning existing engagement surveys, we also expected that students would express hopes for certain kinds of experiences such as staff and peer interactions, study abroad, and participation in extra-curricular activities.

Then we investigated the relation between students' hopes and their demographic characteristics (age, gender, ethnicity, first generation to attend university, and domicile) and environmental variables (campus, faculty, pure vs. applied subject). We hypothesized that the study environment, particularly that the subject they were studying was pure or applied (Biglan, 1973), would be associated with intrinsic versus job-related motivations, respectively. We further hypothesized that some, particularly first generation university students and overseas students, would not be able to clearly articulate specific hopes (Kuh, 2016). We also expected that older students would have more specific hopes.

Finally, we investigated which factors (demographic, environmental, and the nature of their hopes) would be associated with whether their hopes had been fulfilled. We expected that factors within all three types of variables would be significantly related to hope fulfillment, particularly age, ethnicity, campus, discipline type, and the nature of their hopes.

Method

Participants

Undergraduate students in their first through third years ($N=1772$; 1,083 female) at a two-campus UK university were surveyed midway through the academic year. Students were

classified according to demographic characteristics and environmental variables, including whether they were studying a pure (55%) or applied (45%) subject.

Data Sources and Thematic Coding

Students were asked two open-ended questions as part of an online institution-wide survey: “1. When you decided to come to this university, what learning experiences did you want?” and “2. How has that turned out? i.e. Have you had this opportunity? Have your hopes or expectations now changed? How?”

Hopes. The total dataset of answers to question 1 contained 34,497 words with a mean of 20 words per response. Individual student responses ranged from 0 to 129 words. Using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), we coded each student’s response to what they wanted from their learning experience with one of the following: *interest in the subject*, *apply learning* (career-related, real world connections, practice, hands-on learning), *explore and apply* (both explore subject and applications), *grow as person*, *nonspecific*, *interact with peers*, *interact with staff*, *interactivity in general*, *affective experience* (e.g., wanting to be inspired), *study abroad*, *academic community*, *facilities/resources*, or *other*. Initially, more than 25 potential categories were identified inductively, staying close to students’ own language. Then both authors iteratively combined and refined potential themes based on the existing literature through a process of consensus coding (Kuckartz, 2014) of subsets of the responses, annotating rules for each code (Table 1). The code *apply learning* was further divided into seven sub-codes to help distinguish attainment value from utility value (Table 2).

Hope fulfillment. The total dataset for responses to question 2 contained 45,551 words with a mean of 26 words and a range of 0 to 414 words per response. Following a similar process of coder calibration, answers were coded: *fulfilled or exceeded*; *partly fulfilled*; *changed*; *unsure or not yet*; and *unfulfilled*. In the analysis, *fulfilled or exceeded* and *partly fulfilled* were combined and contrasted with *unfulfilled*.

Demographics. Students indicated which of the two campuses they studied at, their faculty, school and discipline, gender, ethnicity, age, study year, UK/EU or overseas status, and first generation status.

Quantitative Analyses

Frequencies for each code were calculated. Chi square analyses and logistic regression were used to examine the relations between demographic variables, environmental variables and each of the seven most common hoped-for learning experiences as well as whether their hopes had been fulfilled.

Results

Students’ Hopes for their Learning Experiences

The most frequent responses to “What did you want from your university learning experience?” were: *explore subject* (20% of students), *apply learning* (16%), *nonspecific* (12%), *grow as person* (11.5%), *explore and apply* (10%), *interact with peers* (8%) and *interact with staff* (4%). We concentrate on those seven most common responses which capture the majority (81.5%) of responses.

Hopes and Relationship with Other Variables

As expected, more students in applied than pure subjects described *apply learning* hopes, $\chi^2(1,1696)=24.243, p<.001$. Hypotheses about demographic variables were not supported, though. Except for ethnicity, there were few significant relationships between demographic variables and students' hopes for university learning experiences. Surprisingly, more black or minority ethnic (BME) students than white students described *apply learning* hopes, $\chi^2(1,1662)=10.099, p<.001$. More white students than BME students described *explore subject*, $\chi^2(1,1662)=28.918, p<.001$. As BME students were significantly more likely to study applied subjects, $\chi^2(1,1722)=60.354, p<.001$, we analysed subject groups separately. In applied subjects, BME students were still less likely to report *explore subject*, $\chi^2(1,746)=19.428, p<.001$, and more likely to report *apply learning* hopes, $\chi^2(1,746)=9.332, p<.01$, than their white peers. In pure subjects, fewer BME students had *explore subject*, $\chi^2(1,915)=5.489, p<.05$, though there were no significant differences on *apply learning*, $\chi^2(1,915)=.514$.

Variables Associated with Hope Fulfillment

The only significant demographic variable associated with *unfulfilled* hopes was ethnicity, $\chi^2(1,1470)=4.290, p<.05$. BME students were more likely to have *unfulfilled* hopes. When disaggregating by subject group, though, this trend only held for pure subjects, $\chi^2(1,818)=5.144, p<.05$, not applied subjects, $\chi^2(1,746)=.142, ns$. Contrary to hypotheses, environment was not significantly related to whether hopes were fulfilled, with Campus $\chi^2(1,1494)=.312$, Faculty, $\chi^2(2,1481)=.331$, and Pure versus applied subjects, $\chi^2(1,1493)=2.775$, all nonsignificant.

As expected, the nature of the desired learning experience was related to whether students' hopes had been fulfilled. Those with *explore subject*, $\chi^2(1,1483)=9.768, p<.01$, *explore and apply* hopes, $\chi^2(1,1772)=8.996, p<.01$, or desire for *grow as person*, $\chi^2(1,1483)=6.350, p<.05$, were more likely to report their hopes were fulfilled than those with other hopes. Those who wanted to *interact with staff*, $\chi^2(1,1483)=7.156, p<.01$, were more likely to be disappointed than those who did not.

On a logistic regression predicting hope fulfillment (Table 3), ethnicity was not a significant predictor. Those who wanted to *explore subject*, *grow as a person*, *explore and apply* and *interact with peers* were more likely to have their hopes fulfilled.

Discussion

Students expressed a range of different hopes for their learning experiences. Consistent with expectancy-value theory (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000), *explore subject* aligned well with intrinsic value, while some of the sub-codes of *apply learning* (e.g. career preparation and networking) clearly aligned with attainment value. Other aspects of *apply learning* represented utility value. Given the substantial percentage who reported *explore and apply* hopes, students may explicitly want experiences for a mixture of intrinsic, attainment, and utility values. Other codes such as *grow as person*, *interact with peers* and *interact with staff* did not fit so obviously within the value categories of Eccles's expectancy-value theory, in part because students' ultimate purpose in seeking these processes or activities may not have been clearly stated.

Nonetheless, contrary to cynical assumptions about students' consumerist orientations (Molesworth et al., 2009), the majority of these students spontaneously expressed desires related

to the process of learning. Partially supporting Kuh's (2016) assertions, some students were not specific in their desires (12%), suggesting they might benefit from guidance about what kinds of behaviors and opportunities promote positive learning outcomes (Finley & McNair, 2013).

The different patterns of hopes among BME students has implications for addressing the ethnicity attainment gap (Equality Challenge Unit, 2017) in higher education in the UK and other countries. These findings may also help explain why utility-value interventions are particularly effective with minority students in the US (Hulleman, Godes, Hendricks, & Harackiewicz, 2010).

Practically, given the link between students' hopes and whether those have been fulfilled, it is important to understand what students want and provide opportunities for them to realize their goals. Overall, the pattern of hopes that are *fulfilled* provides useful institutional information about educational strengths.

Significance and Further Research

This study makes a vital conceptual contribution by highlighting the need for a more holistic model of student engagement that considers students' motivations, not just their behaviors. It also makes an important empirical contribution by examining current students' desired learning experience *de novo* from qualitative responses to open-ended questions, rather than responses to items based on pre-existing psychological constructs. This approach is particularly important for capturing the perspectives of under-represented minorities whose voices have been largely absent in mainstream educational and psychological theorizing. Differences by ethnicity were a significant finding with potential for re-directing efforts for closing attainment gaps.

The major emergent categories of students' responses may be generally applicable, even though the patterns of responses are likely to vary by institution. Thus they provide a platform for further research based on broader conceptions of student motivation. To better understand why students might choose certain types of behavioral engagement, it may be useful to understand the different kinds of value (e.g., intrinsic, attainment, or utility value) students see in particular desired activities (e.g., peer interaction). As this study relied on responses from experienced students, it would be useful to validate it against a survey of entering students. Finally, in view of attainment gaps by ethnicity, future research should attend to the reasons BME students may prefer *apply learning* experiences and how those preferences affect their interaction with curricula.

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Table. 1 *Frequencies and Explanations for Codes for Students' Hopes for their Learning Experience in Higher Education*

Code	Frequency	% of students	Notes on code
Explore subject	345	19.5	Learning for the sake of interest in their subject. They explicitly state interest in their subject, making reference to their subject, choice of modules, specific skills, techniques or tools, in-depth learning of topics, or to particular topics.
Application-oriented	269	15.2	Learning oriented toward applications, e.g., learning the necessary skills for a career, or interest in placements, volunteering, internships, and learning of practical relevance for real-life or career clarification.
Explore and apply	171	9.7	Code when students mention both an interest in the subject and an interest in being prepared for life after university.
Nonspecific	213	12.0	Generic appeals to quality (e.g. 'good teaching'), wish to obtain a degree, nonspecific references to learning (e.g. 'a good learning experience'), or denying any expectations.
Grow as person	194	10.9	Either explicit reference to wanting to develop and grow (e.g, express or develop one's own ideas about the subject, build confidence) or reference to challenge and independence. Given priority if mentioned alongside another expectation, unless mentioned alongside both career-related aim and explore subject, then code as explore and apply.
Interact with peers	152	8.6	Class discussions, peer mentoring, learning with other students, as well as socialising with other students outside of class. Give priority if mentioned alongside another expectation such as extra-curricular activities, unless mentioned alongside both career-related and explore subject, then code as explore and apply.
Interact with staff	64	3.6	In-class as well as out-class interaction with lecturers or professional staff, good relationship with staff, help or support from staff, small class sizes, etc.
Study abroad	33	1.9	Study abroad.
Academic community	29	1.6	Reference to an academic community, learning community, diverse community, community of like-minded people, community of students and staff, etc.

Table 1 continued

Interactivity	28	1.6	Interactive teaching and learning, without clearly distinguishing interactions with peers or teachers.
Facilities or resources	16	0.9	Library, study hubs, specific resources for courses, online learning, lecture recordings, etc.
Affective experience	14	0.8	When they want others, such as teachers, to prompt particular emotional responses, such as enthusiasm, passion, high interest, inspiration, motivation, or enjoyment. Only code if it stands alone.
Extracurricular activities	8	0.5	Code only if it stands alone without reference to any other goals. Note: Extracurricular activities are sometimes mentioned under other categories in service of career-related goals or interact with peers.
Other	162	9.1	Unclear or expectations not clearly codable as any of the above. Includes, e.g., work-life balance, support, timetabling, feedback.
No response	74	4.2	
Total	1,772	100.0	

Table 2. *Frequencies and Explanations for Sub-codes of Students' Apply learning Hopes for their Learning Experiences*

Sub-code	Frequency	Percent of all students	Percent of <i>apply learning</i>	Notes on sub-code
Career Orientation	14	0.8	5.2	Experiences that help them figure out what career path they want to take or specialise in.
Employability	112	6.3	41.6	Gaining employability skills or enhancing their employability through placements, internships, etc. Also code when students want to gain the necessary qualifications for a specific job.
Networking	3	0.2	1.1	Finding or making contacts that will aid them in their future career.
Practical learning	66	3.7	24.5	Practical, hands-on learning experiences, such as lab work, practicals, workshops, using practical equipment, etc., i.e. by applying theoretical knowledge they have gained.
Real world application	56	3.2	20.8	Learning experiences that relate to, prepare them for, or resemble the real world, e.g. through field trips or by using real-world examples. May be non-specific references to the real-world or may also reference daily life, particular activities, or future career utility.
Volunteering	8	0.5	3.0	Volunteering opportunities.
Other	10	0.6	3.7	Other comments related to careers, e.g. students on apprenticeships or currently working who wanted their university experience to supplement or fit with this current work, or comments related to self-employment.
Sub-total	269	15.2	100.0	
Other codes	1503	84.8		
Total (all codes)	1772	100.0		

Table 3. *Logistic Regression for Background Characteristics, Environmental Variables and Hopes as Predictors of Hope Fulfillment*

Variables	B	S.E.	Sig	Odds Ratio
Gender	-.071	.168	.674	.932
Ethnicity	-.268	.188	.153	.765
First Generation	.024	.174	.889	1.025
Age	-.133	.124	.362	.893
1st or 2nd Year	-.393	.162	.015*	.675
Pure or Applied	-.200	.178	.262	.819
Campus 1 or 2	.367	.309	.235	1.444
Hope=Explore Subject	.844	.256	.001***	2.326
Hope=Apply learning	.048	.260	.853	1.049
Hope=Nonspecific	.202	.273	.459	1.224
Hope= Grow as a person	1.128	.348	.001***	3.089
Hope=Explore and apply	1.236	.374	.001***	3.443
Hope=Interact with peers	.635	.321	.048*	1.886
Hope=Interact with staff	-.182	.365	.619	.834

Note: All Variable(s) entered on Step 1. N=198 Unfulfilled; N=929 Fulfilled (82.4%).
 -2 Log Likelihood=992.441; R²=.048 (Cox and Snell); R²=.079 (Nagelkerke). Model
 X²(16)=55.198, p=000