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## The Relation between College Student Involvement and Satisfaction

The purpose of this study was to examine the relation between college students' involvement and their overall satisfaction with their college experience. It was predicted that the more a student is involved, the more he/she will be satisfied with the college experience. The 60 male and female respondents were traditional students at Anderson University in Anderson, SC. A survey was administered to assess student involvement based on the diversity (types of activities) and amount (hours per week) of participation. Each student's satisfaction with college also was assessed using a self-devised scale. A moderate positive correlation was detected,  $p < .01$ , where 12% of the variance in student satisfaction was accounted for by student involvement. The implications and limitations are discussed.

According to the Consortium for Student Retention Data Exchange (n.d.), retention rates in higher education increased slightly from 1997 through 2003 (probably given the recent attention devoted to identifying factors related to retention in higher education research), but retention rates in the early nineties were reportedly as low as 50%- 60%, according to Hatcher, Kryter, Prus, & Fitzgerald (as cited in Donohue & Wong, 1997). When students leave or drop out of college, it has a negative impact on recruitment, registration and housing, and student loan commitment, along with social cohesiveness among cohorts. Similarly, higher retention rates have been associated with more involved and generous alumni activities (see Noel-Levitz, Inc., 2005-06). To survive in today's market, institutions typically need to

maintain or increase their student enrollment and retain students who are academically successful. Numerous public and private organizations exist for the purposes of understanding and increasing student retention (e.g., Center for the Study of College Student Retention, Cooperative Institutional Research Program) and predicting college performance (National Center for Fair and Open Testing; see Rice & Darke, 2000). One critical component of retention and performance is the extent to which students are satisfied with their college experience and, as such, institutions have begun to focus on the factors related to student satisfaction (Noel-Levitz, 2005-06).

According to Okun and Weir (1990), college satisfaction is "a student's cognitive evaluation of the overall quality of his/her college life at a particular institution of higher education" (p. 59).

Student satisfaction is of increasing importance to administrators of higher education due to heightened competition among institutions (see Bateson & Taylor, 2004). One popular approach to maximizing student satisfaction involves appealing to business models of customer satisfaction. Popli (2005), for example, discusses the importance of customer satisfaction in retail. It is typically of utmost importance for an owner/manager of a retail store to please his customers in hopes that they will return for yet another purchase and even recommend his business to others. Likewise, a college or institution should strive to satisfy its students, which will encourage them to return for another semester of education as well as to recommend the school to prospective students. If a university is experiencing a quick or dramatic decline in its number of students, the first step is to determine why students are dissatisfied and then how it can be rectified.

Several variables related to student satisfaction have been identified through previous research. Pennington, Zvonkovic, and Wilson (1989) listed grade point average, class standing, credit hours, dating status, and place of residence as important factors contributing to college satisfaction. Weir and Okun (1989) suggested that social support is related positively to satisfaction with college as well as faculty-student contact, self-esteem, and relationships with close friends. Roommate compatibility (e.g., similar living habits, routines, cleanliness, and attitudes) also was determined to be an important predictor of satisfaction (Ogletree, Turner, Vieira, & Brunotte, 2005). Yet another study by Geyer, Brannon, & Shearon (2001) found that student satisfaction is related to two situational variables: how many quarters the student had completed and whether the institution was the student's first choice. The choice of the institution seems important for enhancing student-environment fit. By applying Holland's theory of career suggesting that people flourish in environments congruent with their personality types, Feldman, Smart, and Ethington (2004) argued that students will be

more content with their college experience when their goals and personality types are compatible with the college services and environment.

One way to increase such compatibility between students and their institutions is by honing recruitment strategies (i.e., target potential students whose needs will be served well at one's intuition), but this strategy may be limited in two ways. Firstly, by recruiting only certain types of students the institution may create a less diverse student population for itself (perhaps undermining a more over-arching goal of higher education aside from retention). Secondly, attempts to recruit students who will fit well in the institution may be misguided. Sometimes students who are perceived to be high in compatibility with the institution both by themselves and by admissions counselors, in reality, are not very compatible with the institution. Perhaps this lack of student-environment fit can be combated through increased student involvement in activities on and off campus. Even if students initially feel that they do not belong at an institution, their attitudes and behavior may change through heightened involvement.

The role of students' involvement in their satisfaction has been highlighted by several research studies. Weir and Okun (1989) identified participation in college events as a significant predictor of student's satisfaction with college; that is, students who reported frequent participation also reported a higher level of college satisfaction. Similarly, Abrahamowicz (1988) analyzed students' responses to the question, "How well do you like college?" and found that 65% of students who were members of a campus organization responded "enthusiastic" to this question whereas only 17% of nonmembers gave this same response (p.236). Even participation in one particular activity may increase student satisfaction. Pascarella and Smart (1991), for example, showed that athletic participation alone may be related to higher levels of student satisfaction. Athletes were more likely to report higher levels of satisfaction with their overall college experience than were their

nonathlete counterparts. The Howard Community College Student Satisfaction Report (2003) revealed that students who claimed low involvement in activities consistently rated lower in satisfaction towards aspects of student life while students with higher involvement rated higher in satisfaction. Likewise, Borglum and Kubala (2000) suggested that colleges failing to integrate students academically *and/or* socially will experience low student retention (see also Stoecker, Pascarella, & Wolfe, 1988).

The purpose of the present study was to assess the relation between student involvement and student satisfaction at a private, church-affiliated institution. Self-devised surveys were used to measure students' involvement and satisfaction. Student involvement scores included participation in a variety of college-sanctioned and more informal social activities and student satisfaction was measured as an overall score determined by specific satisfaction levels in various areas, such as academic experiences, administrative functions, and personal development. Based on previous findings, it was predicted that student involvement and student satisfaction would be related positively.

## Method

### Participants

There were a total of 60 male and female respondents, all of whom were students at Anderson University in Anderson, SC. They were recruited from residence halls, athletic teams, an Aerobics class, and a Fine Arts class. No direct or material benefits or incentives were received for participating in this experiment. The age of the respondents ranged from an average 18 to 30 years and respondents lived in campus housing as well as off-campus housing.

### Apparatus

Data was collected by a survey that assessed student involvement as well as student satisfaction. The survey was developed by the researcher for the purpose of this study; it was

specifically created for Anderson University students. The clubs and organizations listed in the student-involvement portion of the survey are clubs and organizations found at Anderson University. Items listed in the student-satisfaction portion of the survey were general, however, and could be applied to students at any institution.

Respondents were assigned an involvement score based on the diversity of their involvement as well as how many hours per week they devoted to formal activities and organizations. There were five different types of activities: Athletic, Religious, Fine Arts, Clubs, and Work Study. If respondents did not participate in any activity, they were assigned a "0" for diversity, if they participated in activities of only one type, they were assigned a "1" for diversity, if they participated in two types of activities, they were assigned a "2" for diversity, etc. Therefore, the possible range of diversity scores was 0-5. Respondents then were assigned a score describing their amount of involvement according to the following scale: zero hours = 0, one to five hours = 1, six to ten hours = 2, 11-15 hours = 3, 16-20 hours = 4, 21-25 hours = 5, 26-30 hours = 6, 31-35 hours = 7, and 36 hours or more = 8. The two scores earned for diversity and amount of involvement were then combined to determine each respondent's overall involvement.

Student satisfaction was calculated by first assigning the answers to items on the satisfaction scale a value. Responses to every item, except Item #5, were assigned the following values: Strongly Agree = 5, Agree = 4, Neutral = 3, Disagree = 2, Strongly Disagree = 1. Responses to Item #5 were scored reversely. The values for each item score were summed to calculate each respondent's overall satisfaction score.

### Procedure

Surveys were administered and collected until calculation of respondents' involvement scores yielded twenty scores between 0-3, twenty scores between 4-7, and twenty scores of 8 or higher. This was done to ensure the sample included

respondents with a range of student involvement scores. All other surveys, beyond the first twenty collected from each "level" of involvement, were discarded.

The Informed Consent Form and cover page of the survey gave clear directions for completing the survey (see Appendix). The researcher introduced the purpose of the survey and instructed students to sign the Informed Consent Form and return their completed surveys to the researcher (who placed them in a separate envelope so the surveys could not be linked with their signatures). After completion of the survey, each participant was given a "thank you" note and contact information in case respondents wanted to inquire about the results of the study.

## Results

A Cronbach's alpha test was calculated to determine the internal consistency of the student-satisfaction portion of the survey. The resulting alpha value (.91) suggested that each item was reliable in comparison to the other items and, thus, no item was removed for analyses.

Tables 1 and 2 show mean responses for survey items and Table 3 shows mean totals for respondents' scores for diversity and amount (hours) of participation, overall involvement, as well as overall satisfaction. Respondents allocated the greatest number of hours per week to athletics and the fewest number of hours per week to academic societies. The items on the student-satisfaction portion of the survey that generated the highest scores were, "I like Anderson University" and "Overall, I have had a positive experience here at Anderson University"; the items that generated the lowest scores were, "If a graduate program that I was interested in was offered here at Anderson University, I would apply" and "I am satisfied with the different administrative departments at Anderson University."

A scatter plot of student involvement scores and student satisfaction scores for the respondents is shown in Figure 1. A linear

regression analysis was calculated, and the best prediction line for one's satisfaction based on his/her involvement may be expressed as:  $\text{satisfaction} = 0.73(\text{involvement score}) + 33.91$ . A moderate positive correlation was identified ( $r = .35$ ) and 12% of the variance in college satisfaction was accounted for by college involvement ( $R^2 = .12, p = .008$ ), indicating a significant relation between student involvement and student satisfaction.

## Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to determine if a relation exists between college students' involvement and their overall satisfaction with Anderson University. The prediction that a student with high college involvement would be more satisfied with his/her college experience was supported by the moderate positive correlation obtained. These current findings are consistent with prior research concerning factors that contribute to college satisfaction (e.g., Abrahamowicz, 1988; Howard Community College, 2003; Pascarella & Smart, 1991; Rice & Darke, 2000; Weir & Okun, 1989) and extends them to a private, church-affiliated institution.

## Implications and Applications

This line of research is of core importance for colleges and universities to understand and combat student attrition. Despite a surge of recent attention in higher education towards student retention, attrition rates have decreased only slightly in the last eight years. Increasing student involvement in events of any type (athletic, social, academic, etc.) should increase student satisfaction and, consequently, increase student retention. The greater a student's involvement, furthermore, the more benefit that may be reaped from his/her involvement.

Because research shows that a way to increase student satisfaction is to increase student involvement, many colleges and universities should produce opportunities for students to be involved as well as continually

encourage involvement. Graham and Gisi (2000) suggested that the amount of time a student spends becoming more involved is affected by his/her sense of the college's values as well as his/her perception of the college's concern for students. Therefore, a college can increase involvement by showing a greater concern for students and students' needs, perhaps by providing a greater amount and range of opportunities for involvement. Another strategy for increasing student involvement is to formalize requirements for student involvement. This latter tactic might involve implementing freshmen orientation courses or requiring students to complete community or campus service projects. Bowman and Waite (2003) showed that something as minor as participation in psychological research increased students' satisfaction with their experiences and views of psychology and research.

Requiring students to participate in such activities, rather than merely encouraging participation, may be advantageous because there is evidence that not all students have the ability to be involved. Riggio, Watring, and Throckmorton (1993) observed that, without social skills, it is difficult to participate in campus events. Accordingly, they concluded that the possession of social skills is the ability that actually allows a student to be successful in participating in college activities. It may be the case that students who lack social skills upon entering higher education may not choose to participate in events and, therefore, fail to learn the social skills to increase their future participation. Incorporating requirements for student involvement may increase the number of students who further develop their social skills and gain confidence to participate more often when provided subsequent volunteer opportunities.

Alan Seidman (2004) of the Center for the Study of College Student Retention recommends that institution administrators work to identify students at risk before enrollment. This can be accomplished through required essays, standardized assessment of incoming freshmen,

development of students' academic and personal goals, and identification of socio-economic status and family structure. Other factors related to student attrition that may be observed after classes begin are sparse attendance, low grades, lack of participation, and being inattentive or disruptive in class, among many others. The point is that once students are identified, further efforts can be made to integrate those particular students more fully into the college life.

The findings of the present study, as well as previous studies, are not only useful to colleges and universities but other settings as well. For instance, perhaps employees' involvement in work gatherings (e.g., cook-outs, Christmas parties, dinners) influences their satisfaction in the workplace. Perhaps church members' involvement in church activities (e.g., teaching Sunday school, attending retreats, volunteering for a bake sale) influences their satisfaction with the church. These results could even be extended to town-members being more satisfied with their hometown if they are more involved in activities within the town. Leaders of any sort may take heed to these results and encourage membership to get involved.

### **Limitations and Considerations**

The analyses conducted suggest only a moderate positive correlation in regards to the present study. There are several reasons why a stronger relationship may not have been obtained. Some limitations that exist are the use of a small, homogeneous sample. There were only 60 respondents, all of whom attended Anderson University, a private university affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention. Many of the respondents, therefore, were similar in faith, socioeconomic status, and educational goals. It should also be noted that the student satisfaction levels in general (across all respondents) at this institution were fairly high.

Respondents used in the present study were all full-time traditional students, but Anderson University also provides education to nontraditional students in their adult education programs at night. Although some of the

respondents commute to classes from off-campus residences, none of the nontraditional ("night") students participated. This may limit the generality of the findings to all types of students at Anderson University, especially given some documented differences between components of college satisfaction in traditional versus nontraditional students (e.g., Donohue & Wong, 1997; Ness, 2003).

There were many variables that were not measured in the present study that may be related to student satisfaction. Noel-Levitz (2005-06) reported that less students attending four-year institutions (compared to five years ago) feel satisfied that their tuition is a worthwhile investment. Despite the possible impact that the cost of education might have on student satisfaction, this variable was not measured. Other variables such as gender, major, employment, dating status, class standing, and residence were not measured either, although each of them have been identified as predictors of student satisfaction (Bowman & Waite, 2003; Pennington et al., 1989).

Pennington et al. (1989) also reported trends in student satisfaction levels over the academic year, where satisfaction levels in the middle of the spring semester are lower than at other times in the academic year. In the present study, satisfaction was measured at this time (around mid-term of spring semester). It is possible, then, that some of the students' satisfaction scores were lower than if the survey had been administered at another time. Contrary to the possibility that satisfaction scores were lower than they might typically be (due to the time of year), the overall satisfaction of students at Anderson University is high. Perhaps the students of Anderson University are particularly compatible with the environment of the school. This could explain why students who report little or no involvement are still satisfied (see Feldman et al., 2004).

One reason why the relation between involvement and satisfaction was only moderately strong could be the inclusion of Items 8 and 9 on the student-satisfaction portion

of the survey. Despite a Cronbach's alpha score of 0.91, responses on these two items were consistently lower than responses on the remaining items. Item 8 read, "If a graduate program that I was interested in was offered here at Anderson University, I would apply"; just because the respondent checked "Strongly Disagree" does not mean he/she is unsatisfied with the school but instead maybe he/she just isn't interested in graduate school. Item 9 read, "I am satisfied with the different administrative departments at Anderson University"; again, just because the respondent selected "Strongly Disagree" for his/her answer doesn't mean he/she is unsatisfied with the school but instead he/she may have had a bad experience with a specific department and was reminded of it when he/she read the statement. An inter-item analysis was completed to determine if these items were unrelated to the other items and, although the two items were more weakly correlated with the other survey items, the researchers determined the correlations were not low enough to omit the items from analyses. Nonetheless, responses to these two items may have lowered a highly involved respondent's satisfaction score, thus reducing Pearson's *r*.

### **Additional Benefits of College Involvement**

While it is apparent that student involvement can be beneficial to a student's satisfaction, it is also important to consider and assess the other benefits one can attain simply by taking an active role on campus. Abrahamowicz (1988) concluded that participation in student organizations and activities can make a significant contribution to a college student's development. Graham and Gisi (2000) reported that college involvement is positively related to student learning and development as well. They also argued that involvement in the campus environment, as well as out-of-class experiences, is beneficial for cognitive and affective growth. Pascarella and Smart (1991) found that involvement, particularly in athletics, produces great interpersonal and leadership skills as well as motivation to complete a college degree. So,

although the present research sought to assess the importance of student involvement as related to student satisfaction, there appear to be a number of benefits for institutions and students through enhancement of student involvement.

### Conclusions

In conclusion, the results of this present study suggest that a college student's level of involvement could play an important role in influencing his/her satisfaction with the college. These findings support previous research and suggest that college involvement is just as important now as ever before. Furthermore, they extend findings based on larger samples of students at much larger institutions to a smaller sample of students at a private, church affiliated institution wherein the institutional philosophy and mission are more specific than those at secular institutions. Although some students may not have the skills to become involved when entering higher education, it is suggested that institutions focus on reaching as many students as possible to integrate them fully into the environment. Both the student and the institution would benefit from such increased involvement.

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Table 1

*Mean responses across all respondents on survey items assessing college involvement.*

Student-Involvement Portion of the Survey

Survey Question	Mean Response
How many hours do you spend participating in AU athletics weekly?	4.39
How many hours do you attend AU athletics weekly?	2.22
How many hours do you spend performing in AU Fine Arts Events weekly?	1.27
How many hours per week do you attend AU Fine Arts Events?	0.70
How many hours per week do you participate in AU intramural sports?	0.94
How many hours per week do you participate in Christian organizations?	1.21
How many hours per week do you participate in Women's Ministry's Events?	0.24
How many hours per week do you participate in informal bible study?	0.52
How many hours per week do you participate in AU Student Government?	0.16
How many hours per week do you participate in AU Academic Societies?	0.16
How many hours per week do you participate in AU clubs?	0.32
How many hours per week do you participate in campus work study jobs?	1.97
How many organized campus trips have you been on?	1.59
How long did the trips last?	3.29

Table 2

*Mean scores across all respondents on survey items assessing student satisfaction.*

*Responses ranged from 1-5, where 1 = strong disagreement & 5 = strong agreement with the statement.*

Student-Satisfaction Portion of the Survey	
Survey Question	Mean Score
I like Anderson University.	4.10
If I could start over again, I would still choose/attend Anderson University.	3.88
So far, I am satisfied with my experience here at Anderson University.	4.02
I would recommend Anderson University to others.	4.05
If I could, I would transfer to another University/College.	3.74
I am satisfied with the faculty and staff here at Anderson University.	3.64
Overall, I have had a positive experience here at Anderson University.	4.10
If a graduate program that I was interested in was offered here at Anderson University, I would apply.	3.41
I am satisfied with the different administrative departments at Anderson University.	3.43
I have grown emotionally, spiritually, and mentally since my enrollment at Anderson University.	4.07

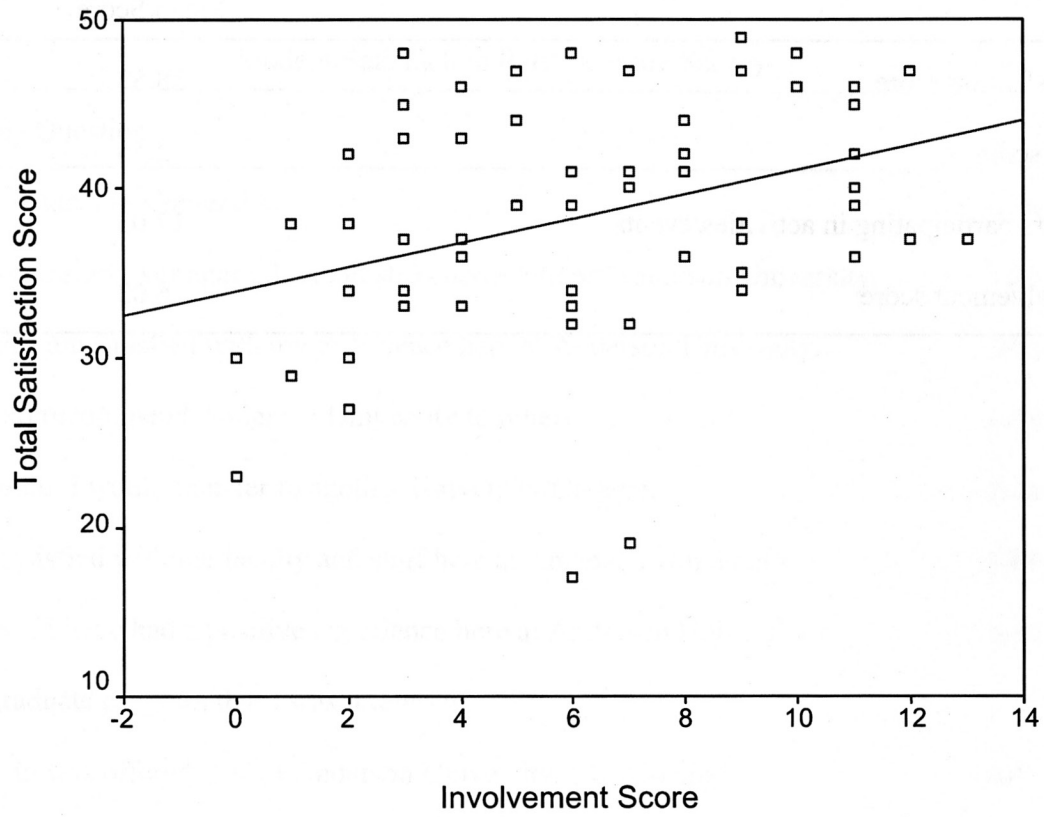
Table 3

*Mean score across all participants in overall student satisfaction, diversity of involvement, amount (hours) of involvement, and overall student involvement.*

	Mean Score
Total satisfaction score	38.52
Diversity score	2.55
Total hours participating in activities/events	17.03
Total involvement score	6.03

Figure Caption

Figure 1. Scatterplot of student involvement scores and student satisfaction scores along with the best-fitting line.



## Appendix

Instructions provided to respondents before completing the survey.

**Thank you for taking time out of your day to complete this survey.**

**The goal of this questionnaire is to learn about student life.**

**PLEASE READ THE DIRECTIONS CAREFULLY.**

- *On the left is a list of items.*
- *On the right, please write in the number of hours you spend per week (on average) participating in the events/organizations/clubs on the left.*
- *If your activity requires practice, include practice time as well.*
- *If you hold a leadership position or dedicate any other time besides formal meetings to the activity/club/organization also include that in the number of hours.*
- *If you are a member or do participate in a certain event but it is not on a weekly basis please note that and estimate the number of hours you participate per semester.*
- *If you do not participate in the activity, put a 0 in the right column.*