Assessing Quality and Equity in High-Impact Practices

Many colleges and universities are promoting the value of High-Impact Practices (HIPs) such as service-learning, undergraduate research, internships, and study abroad. Findings from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) demonstrate that students benefit from engagement in HIPs, yet simply offering such activities does not guarantee high-quality learning or even participation. Assessing Quality and Equity in High-Impact Practices, a project led by the Center for Postsecondary Research at Indiana University Bloomington with support from Lumina Foundation, explores how effective these experiences are in helping all students learn.

Eight Key Elements of High-Impact Practices

1. Performance expectations set at appropriately high levels
2. Significant investment of time and effort by students over an extended period of time
3. Interactions with faculty and peers about substantive matters
4. Experiences with diversity wherein students are exposed to and must contend with people and circumstances that differ from those with which students are familiar
5. Frequent, timely, and constructive feedback
6. Periodic, structured opportunities to reflect and integrate learning
7. Opportunities to discover relevance of learning through real-world applications
8. Public demonstration of competence

Project Genesis and Mission

Assessing Quality and Equity in HIPs builds on NSSE’s longstanding commitment to study and advance effective educational practice and student success. The project extends NSSE’s role in catalyzing interest in HIPs, assessing HIPs, and supporting colleges and universities in using evidence to improve these enriching—often life-changing—undergraduate experiences. It also addresses the current urgency to make HIPs more widespread while ensuring their effectiveness and developing long-term strategies to assess and improve their implementation.

Project Rationale

The use of HIPs and confidence in their educational benefits is at an all-time peak in higher education. This corresponds with the interest in high-quality experiential learning of a range of higher education member organizations (including AAC&U, NASH, AASCU, etc.), employers, and the public. Processes for tracking participation, disaggregating who experiences HIPs, and developing HIP standards and taxonomies have expanded. Yet while awareness about the value of HIPs and HIP activity have become more widespread, many institutions, state systems, and member- and consortium-based organizations have raised concerns about the actual quality and equity of opportunity. Specifically, evidence is lacking about the eight key elements that typify HIPs (see list at left) and about the access of historically underrepresented students to high-quality HIP experiences. Strong interest has also emerged in exploring specific HIPs to learn more about how they contribute to student learning and success. In practical terms, institutional and collaborative initiatives to elevate and expand HIPs need straightforward measures to assess HIPs, study their effectiveness, and inform implementation efforts.

Project Activities

This project aims to examine the features of HIPs, to understand what contributes to their effectiveness, and to discover patterns associated with particular practices. To this end, the first phase of this project involved the development of survey items and administration processes to gather data on students’ experiences.
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HIP Quality Survey Administration and Preliminary Results

The “HIP Quality” survey invited students to respond to a set of follow-up questions about a selected HIP they had experienced. Sample questions are featured at left. The survey was administered in spring 2019, either as an experimental set appended to NSSE or as an independent administration via Qualtrics. The data set includes responses from over 25,000 students at 58 institutions. Nearly half of respondents were students of color, two thirds of respondents (65%) were women, and most (83%) were heterosexual.

One indicator of the quality of a HIP is satisfaction with the experience. Students were invited to rate the quality of their HIP experience on a 7-point scale, from excellent to poor. Overall, students were highly satisfied with their HIP experiences. Among seniors, satisfaction was greatest for research with faculty and study abroad, and an examination of satisfaction levels by racial-ethnic identity also reveals relatively high levels of satisfaction across groups (Figures 1 & 2).

Further Study and Implications

Forthcoming analyses will examine the extent to which students were exposed to the HIP elements broadly and explore the factors that uniquely characterize each HIP. We will also study HIPs and elements of quality by racial-ethnic groups. These analyses will inform considerations of what defines a high-quality HIP. This project promises to address equitable access to educational experiences by drawing attention to HIPs that matter for learning and success and to the priority of quality assurance. Results will provide colleges and universities needed evidence that the HIPs they offer are of high quality and are truly associated with better outcomes for students. Importantly, assessing the quality of HIPs experienced by racially minoritized subpopulations can help advance efforts to assure effective learning experiences for all students.

“Initiatives to expand HIPs require straightforward measures for assessing their quality and effectiveness while informing implementation efforts. Organizations interested in implementing HIPs also need strategies to assure that historically underrepresented students have access to high-quality HIP experiences.”

— Jillian Kinzie, Co-Principal Investigator,
Assessing Quality and Equity in High-Impact Practices

Co-principal investigators:
Jillian Kinzie (jkinzie@indiana.edu)
Alexander C. McCormick (amcc@indiana.edu)

Figure 1. Senior Satisfaction by HIP

Figure 2. Senior Satisfaction in HIPs by Race-Ethnicity