

**ENGAGING THE DISENGAGED: FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH  
UNDERGRADUATE CAMPUS LEADERSHIP INVOLVEMENT**

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Student leadership involvement factors were measured by questions on the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Omnibus Survey; 453 undergraduates responded. Parental education, work, future income, GPA, and loans were positively correlated with at least one involvement indicator. Satisfaction, major and career selection, living off-campus, hours watching television and working, and scholarships/fellowships were negatively correlated to at least one indicator.

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**Engaging the Disengaged:  
Factors Associated with Undergraduate Campus Leadership Involvement**

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*Abstract: Student leadership involvement factors were measured by questions on the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Omnibus Survey; 453 undergraduates responded. Parental education, work, future income, GPA, and loans were positively correlated with at least one involvement indicator. Satisfaction, major and career selection, living off-campus, hours watching television and working, and scholarships/fellowships were negatively correlated to at least one indicator.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

The major theory upon which colleges and universities, and especially student affairs practitioners, base the rationale for promoting extracurricular participation and leadership development is Astin's (1984) Theory of Involvement in which involvement is defined as investment of physical and psychological time and energy into activities, tasks, and people. The Theory of Involvement states that students learn by becoming "involved"; thus, the greater the student's involvement in college, the greater the student's learning, personal and leadership development. Students' learning increases the more they are involved in both the academic and social aspects of the collegiate experience. Therefore, faculty and staff interaction both inside and outside the classroom and high quality university programs and policies reflective of institutional commitment to student learning are necessary for student growth and retention. Astin's work remains relevant today and frames this correlational involvement study of randomly selected undergraduate students at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL).

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Astin's (1993) long-term research demonstrates that student involvement enhances "most aspects of the undergraduate student's cognitive and affective development" (p. 394), as has

other research (Cress, Astin, Zimmerman-Oster, & Burkhardt, 2001; Martin, 2000; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991), congruent with the Theory of Involvement. This theory was also supported by a meta-analysis and extensive literature review of research pertaining to the impact of students' out-of-class experiences on their developmental learning outcomes (Gellin, 2003; Terenzini, Pascarella, & Blimling, 1996).

In Astin's (1985) Theory of Involvement, involvement is defined as investment of physical and psychological time and energy into activities, tasks, and people. The theory states that students learn by becoming "involved"; thus, the greater the student's involvement in college, the greater the student's learning and personal development. Astin (1984, 1999) argues the Theory of Involvement has an advantage over traditional pedagogical approaches because it focuses on the motivation and behavior of the student. Therefore, all institutional policies and practices can be measured by the degree of involvement they foster in students. Additionally, all faculty and staff can serve students with the same goal in mind, unifying their energies into making the students more involved in the collegiate environment, and thus better learners.

A large amount of empirical evidence supports the continued use of Astin's theory (1984, 1999) since the weight of college student involvement research supports the basic theoretical tenants. This study, therefore, presumes the importance of college student involvement and examines factors associated with such involvement.

For the purpose of this study, the researchers examined three indicators of student leadership involvement as measured by questions on the Omnibus Survey. The indicators related to student time spent participating in student organizations, volunteer work on or off-campus, and the total number of extracurricular activities. The specific questions used as independent variables from the survey include:

- 1) During an average week, how many hours do you spend participating in student organizations?
- 2) During an average week, how many hours do you spend doing volunteer work off campus?
- 3) How many university extracurricular activities, student organizations, or other organized activities do you participate in?

## **METHODS AND PROCEDURES**

The Omnibus survey is administered by the Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs at University of Nebraska-Lincoln. An omnibus survey serves several purposes and is repeated on a regular basis. The Bureau of Sociological Research at UNL administers the Omnibus Survey once a year to a random sample of regularly-enrolled students and has done so since 1996. All respondents were contacted via telephone. Questions were structured in a variety of formats and there was no unified scale for answers. Respondents were given a "don't know" or "refuse" option when answering questions.

This study was done as a secondary analysis of data from the annual Omnibus Survey. The questions from the survey were chosen for their potential relationship to student involvement, as measured by three questions in the Omnibus Survey. The population of students who participated in the Omnibus Survey in 2004 served as the subjects of the study. Students answering each independent variable question ranged from 450-453. Survey data were imported in to SPSS-PC; means, standard deviations, frequencies and a simple correlation were conducted. Significance for the study was set at .05. This secondary analysis was exempt from Institutional

Review Board approval as it is considered “archival research” and required neither consent nor compensation to access group data records.

## **FINDINGS**

Table 1 indicates the Pearson Correlations computed for factors related to each of the three questions serving as independent variables. Means and standard deviations for each of the three questions are also provided.

Data revealed several factors were significantly correlated (Table 1) to at least one indicator of student leadership involvement, particularly for the total number of extracurricular activities in which a student was involved. For instance, the highest educational level of father and mother were positively related to the number of extracurricular activities. Students involved in a high number of activities also tended to perceive a high need to work while in school, yet the weekly number of hours working was negatively correlated with this group of students. This relationship was also true for students that spend a high number of hours participating in student organizations. Furthermore, for the group of students involved in a high number of activities, there was a positive correlation for taking out student loans but a negative correlation for receipt of scholarships. This was true even though Grade Point Average was positively correlated with this same group.

Living off campus was negatively correlated with student spending time in a high number of organizations. Career-related decision-making was negatively linked to the number of extracurricular activities in which a student was involved.

Two factors were negatively related to the number of extracurricular activities in which a student was involved and time spent in volunteer activities off campus. These factors included the motivation to work in order to gain work experience and time spent watching television. Finally, satisfaction was negatively linked a student’s number of extracurricular activities.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS**

The findings reported here suggest several factors relate to student leadership involvement, particularly for the number of activities in which a student is involved. In this study, we examined undergraduate leadership involvement of students at just one institution, so caution must be used in generalizing the findings to all institutions. However, some implications seem apparent.

The positive relationships between highest educational level of father and mother might imply that students involved in a large number of extracurricular activities come from higher socio-economic backgrounds since education is linked to household income (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002). However, the results suggest that this group of students tends to be overlooked for financial aid that does not involve loans. Such evidence may allow for leadership educators to advocate for scholarships related to leadership involvement and G.P.A., rather than on standardized test scores.

The negative relationship between living off campus and the number of organizations a student was involved was understandable from a proximity perspective. From a policy and programming viewpoint, the relationship implies that efforts to require some or all undergraduates to live on campus remain important. Students will increase their involvement, and ideally increase their personal and leadership development as a consequence of living on campus.

The negative relationship between career-related decision making and the number of extracurricular activities in which a student was involved was of concern. The finding suggests that student leaders in this study were involved in a large number of organizations but did not spend quality time in each of those organizations, and were less likely to make a decision on both a major and career. Since there was no significant relationship with the amount of actual time spent on extracurricular activities, students in a larger number of activities appeared to be less able to make career-related decisions than those that spent relatively more time in a smaller number of organizations. This suggests that those working with campus organization leaders be acutely aware of this possibility and that students are encouraged to take advantage of career services on campus. Future research should be conducted to determine the kind of organizations in which the students were involved and their motivations for being involved. For instance, if someone reported being involved in a larger number of organizations were they primarily campuswide and/or social in nature? If someone reported being involved in a small number of organizations, were the organizations related to their career, department and/or college? Additionally, it would be helpful to determine the student motivation for pursuing a large quantity of involvement with no quality time. Ultimately, the inability to make a decision on a major and a career has opportunity and financial costs that could strain the lives, and budgets of students, families and institutions.

An unexpected finding revealed that satisfaction was negatively linked to a student's number of extracurricular activities. While no significant findings found actual time spent in student organizations related to satisfaction, student involvement as a whole tends to be related positively to student involvement (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). The finding of this study suggests that student leaders that become involved in a high number of organizations, but do not spend quality time in each of those organizations, may be less satisfied with their collegiate experience than those that spend relatively more time in a smaller number of organizations. This finding would be important to share with parents and first-year students as they chart a course for their collegiate years. Additionally, advisors to student organizations that have a preponderance of students that are not active members need to be encouraged to evaluate whether it is in a student's best interest to retain membership without contributing their time and talents.

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Table 1

*Simple Statistics and Correlational Analysis*

	Weekly hours spent participating in Student Organizations	Weekly hours spent doing volunteer work off campus	Number of University extracurricular activities
Frequencies, Means, and Standard Deviations	<i>n</i> =450 <i>M</i> =2.86 <i>SD</i> =8.1	<i>n</i> =453 <i>M</i> =1.06 <i>SD</i> =2.67	<i>n</i> =453 <i>M</i> =1.81 <i>SD</i> =2.08
Highest Father Education Level	.14*	.02	.16*
Highest Mother Education Level	.08	.05	.13*
Necessity of Working While in School	.19*	-.02	.17*
Number of Hours Working	-.16*	.04	-.17*
Student Loans	.09	.02	.11*
Receipt of Scholarships	-.05	-.01	-.21*
G.P.A.	.05	.06	.24*
Living Off Campus	-.18*	-.04	-.22*
Major Selection	-.04	-.05	-.10*
Career Selection	-.01	-.00	-.09*
Working to Gain Career Experience	-.11	-.17*	-.21*
Number of Hours Watching T.V.	-.03	-.09*	-.13*
Satisfaction	-.07	-.04	-.09*

*Note.* \*Pearson Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).