HIGH IMPACT PRACTICES
WHY WE SHOULD INCORPORATE THESE ELEMENTS INTO PRACTICE AND THE IMPACT IT COULD MAKE
HIGH IMPACT PRACTICES

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The essence of high-impact practice is not a new thing. Many of the components were first proposed by Chickering and Gamson (1987) as best and promising practices for undergraduate teaching and learning. The authors identified seven principles which included faculty interaction, student cooperation, active learning, prompt feedback, time on task, high expectations, and respect for diverse talents and learning styles. Later studies demonstrated the positive effects of those practices on student learning and development (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

“STUDENTS WHO PARTICIPATED IN HIGH-IMPACT PRACTICES REPORTED GAINS IN DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES, DISCUSSING IDEAS WITH FACULTY AND PEERS OUTSIDE OF CLASS, ANALYZING AND SYNTHESIZING IDEAS, APPLYING THEORY, EVALUATING THE VALUE OF INFORMATION, CRITICALLY EXAMINING ONE’S OWN VIEWS, AND TRYING TO UNDERSTAND OTHERS’ PERSPECTIVES (KUH, 2008).”
It is possible that a quality high-impact practice—one that improves student learning and transforms a student’s experience—may not possess every element of quality. However, the highest quality experiences will possess a strong majority of them.

**STUDENT LEARNING**

Although the elements of high-impact practice have existed for some time, it has been of relatively recent design to coin them “high-impact practices.” In 2002, The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) called for colleges and universities to embrace four Essential Learning Outcomes (ELOs) for student success. In their view, these outcomes are positioned to help students meet ever-changing demands of the 21st century. The ELOs are:

- Knowledge of human cultures and the physical and natural world through engagement with “big questions,” both contemporary and enduring.
- Intellectual and Practical Skills, including inquiry, critical and creative thinking, written and oral communication, information literacy, quantitative literacy, teamwork, the integration of learning, and problem solving through a pedagogy that gets progressively more challenging.
- Individual and social responsibility, including civic knowledge and engagement, intercultural knowledge and competence, ethical reasoning and action, and foundations and skills for lifelong learning anchored in active involvement with diverse communities and real-world challenges.
- Integrative and applied learning, including the synthesis of understanding across general and specialized studies as demonstrated through the application of knowledge and skills to new settings and complex problems.

In 2007, the AAC&U identified a number of innovative educational practices—which they termed “high-impact practices.” One year later, Kuh (2008) described the benefits of student participation in these practices using results from the well-known National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE, 2007). Many of the reported gains in learning and development mapped directly to the AAC&U’s Essential Learning Outcomes. Students who participated in high-impact practices reported gains in diverse perspectives, discussing ideas with faculty and peers outside of class, analyzing and synthesizing ideas, applying theory, evaluating the value of information, critically examining one’s own views, and trying to understand others’ perspectives (Kuh, 2008). Given their value to student learning and development, Kuh contended that every student should participate in at least two high-impact practices during their college career—one in their first year, and one inside their major.

**ADDITIONAL STUDIES**

Several researchers have recently explored the value of high-impact practices. Brownell and Swaner (2009) explored undergraduate research, learning communities, first year seminars, and service-learning. The authors concluded that the impact of these practices “could potentially be greater when colleges and faculty take the time to design these experiences carefully, paying attention to each piece of planning and implementation” (p. 26). Findings have generally suggested that students who participated in those high-impact practices had higher persistence rates, college GPAs, and rates of peer interaction. Students’ also reported gains in critical thinking skills, appreciation for diversity, belonging, knowledge about campus resources, moral reasoning, social justice orientation, moral reasoning, socially-responsible leadership, a sense of civic responsibility, and overall engagement and satisfaction (Brownell & Swaner, 2009; Kilgo, Sheets, & Pascarella, 2015).

As beneficial as high-impact practices are, issues with access and opportunity exist. Kuh and O’Donnell (2013), drawing on several years of NSSE data, reported that proportionally fewer first-generation students, transfer students, Black, and Hispanic students participated in high-impact practices. This points to a deeper conversation about quality, access, equity, and scaling. Perhaps we need to ask ourselves:

1. How would we know, and to what extent can we demonstrate, if a program or experience is truly a high-impact practice?
2. How equitable is the participation in high-impact practices among our various student sub-populations and underrepresented groups, and what barriers might exist that hinder these students from participating in these high-impact practices?
3. How might we scale quality high-impact practices so that more students, or different groups of students, may experience them?
4. What makes a Quality High-Impact Practice?
# Types of High-Impact Practices

| **First-Year Seminars and Experiences** | First-year students are introduced to “big questions” or new ideas through a small group setting that emphasizes critical inquiry, writing, speaking, information literacy, collaborative learning, and practical skills. |
| **Common Intellectual Experiences** | Students are exposed to a “core” curriculum that is sequenced and covers broad themes or topics. |
| **Learning Communities** | Students are challenged to integrate learning across courses to address “big questions” beyond the classroom. Most experiences explore a common topic and/or common readings, and link group work with faculty interaction. In some cases, students also live together within their learning environment. |
| **Writing-Intensive Courses or Experiences** | Students are encouraged to produce and revise various forms of writing for different audiences and different purposes through repeated practice. This could also apply to ethical inquiry and oral communication. |
| **Collaborative Assignments & Projects** | Students learn to work and solve problems in the company of others, and sharpen their understanding by listening seriously to others—especially with individuals who are unlike them. |
| **Undergraduate Research** | Students are involved in asking “big questions” and encouraged to make empirical observation, utilize cutting edge technology, and foster sense of excitement that comes from working to answer important questions. |
| **Diversity and Global Learning** | Students are exposed to the cultures, experiences, and perspectives of individuals who are different from them. Typically, this exposure involves reconciling difficult differences—such as racial, ethnic, gender inequality, or continuing struggles for human rights, freedom, and power. These are frequently augmented by community-based learning or study abroad. |
| **Service and Community-Based Learning** | Students receive direct experience with an issue they are studying in the curriculum, and with ongoing community efforts to analyze and solve problems. Fundamental to this approach is the application of knowledge in real-world settings and the reflection—a key divergence from volunteerism or philanthropy. Such programs model the value of giving back to the community and working with local partners in preparation for citizenship, work, and life. |
| **Internships** | Students receive direct experience in a work setting, usually related to their career interests. They are supervised, coached, and mentored by professionals in their field. |
| **Capstone or Culminating Courses and Experiences** | Students integrate and apply their learning from a prolonged series of educational experiences. Traditionally, this involves the creation of a portfolio, paper, report, or project. |
Kuh & O’Donnell’s (2013) Eight Elements of High Impact Practice

1. Performance expectations are set at appropriately high levels
Students are challenged to achieve beyond their current ability, and what they believe they are capable of, through projects, assignments, and activities.

2. Significant investment of time and effort by students over an extended period of time
Students participate in projects or assignments that span the course of an entire semester, may have multiple parts that build on each other, and eventually culminate in some deliverable, such as a paper or presentation.

3. Interactions with faculty and peers about substantive matters
Students are frequently challenged (e.g., weekly basis) to participate in a combination of large group, small group, or individual learning exercises.

4. Experiences with diversity or difference
Students are exposed to, must contend with, reflect upon, and discuss the people and real-world circumstances that differ from those with which the student is familiar.

5. Frequent, timely, and constructive feedback
Students meet with, and receive feedback from, peers and the instructor at various points to discuss progress, next steps, and problems encountered and to review the quality of the student’s contribution to the project.

6. Periodic, structured opportunities to reflect and integrate learning
Students are presented with linked courses or activities wherein one project or activity necessitates that students draw on material or discussions had during a previous activity or experience.

7. Opportunities to discover relevance of learning through real-world applications
Students are required to apply the knowledge and skills they have acquired, while also engaging in discussions with peers, supervisors, and instructors as well as reflection on the connection between classroom learning, one’s lived experiences, and the work setting.

8. Public demonstration of competence
Students are evaluated by an instructor, supervisor, or other accomplished practitioner capable of discerning if the student has demonstrated skill attainment or knowledge acquisition.

The foundation for quality high-impact practice lies in pedagogy and design. It is possible that a quality high-impact practice—one that improves student learning and transforms a student’s experience—may not possess every element of quality. However, the highest quality experiences will possess a strong majority of them. Kuh and O’Donnell (2013) identified eight elements of high-impact practice, which are presented in the table below.

When it comes to demonstrating quality, direct and indirect assessment of student learning is appropriate. These findings can, and should, be supplemented with student beliefs, attitudes, and dispositions. Our ability to map the programs outcomes and activities to the elements of high-impact practice is critical to demonstrate our intentionality. We must implement backward design—i.e., we must “begin with the end in mind.” This process involves asking ourselves an additional set of questions: (1) What are the outcomes we hope to achieve? (2) what activities should the students participate in that may lead to these outcomes? (3) How are those activities congruent with the elements of high-impact practice? (4) How must we design the program or experience so that we can deliver on those elements vis-à-vis the identified activities?

ACCESS AND EQUITY

As mentioned earlier, certain groups of students have proportionately less access and experience with many types of high-impact practice. Kuh and O’Donnell (2013) reaffirmed the need for dialogue with students about the benefits of high-impact experiences. Some students may never have entertained the possibility of their participation in one of these transformational activities. The authors stated that “some institutions have made high-impact practices impossible to avoid by sewing them into the curriculum (p. 11).” We therefore must ask ourselves:

- To what extent have we done this within the fraternal experience?
- Can we say that every student has the possibility to transform themselves?
- What might we point to in order to demonstrate how and when every member will experience activities or courses that are grounded in the essential elements of high-impact practice as a part of their membership in a fraternity or sorority?
- What kind of data have we collected and evaluated to document student growth, and the program modifications made in the name of continuous improvement?

Part of understanding access and equity is capturing underserved students’ engagement in high-impact practices. Finley and McNair (2013) presented quantitative data from the 2006 and 2008 NSSE administrations (n=25,336) on participation rates and gains in learning, competence, and social development among
students of different racial backgrounds, first-generation college students, and transfer students. Results indicated more frequent participation by transfer students, and less frequent participation by Black and Hispanic students. The authors reiterated that all students benefit from engagement in multiple high-impact practices, especially those from underserved populations.

Quantitative findings were supplemented with focus group research that triangulated skills that students identified as being important to their future with the AAC&U’s Essential Learning Outcomes and competencies that employers reported as valuable. Also identified were barriers to participation among underserved populations, such as the lack of advising or guidance about what high-impact practices are or why they matter, and an inability to devote the necessary time to such activities because of competing priorities in their already busy lives.

**SCALING-HIGH IMPACT PRACTICES**

Bringing high-impact practices to scale is about shining a light on their occurrence and committing the necessary resources to ensure their quality execution. Scaling also refers to the modifications to existing experiences that are grounded in data and ensure the experience legitimately functions as a high-impact practice (Kuh & O’Donnell, 2013). At its core, the concept of scaling high-impact practices helps us answer the question our students often pose: “Why am I doing this?” Scaling also addresses concerns about access and equity by targeting the expansion of high-impact practices to students who need them the most.

Central to the conversation about scaling is the consideration of policy in a way that instantiates the expectations and opportunities for participation within the community. In this regard, high-impact practices become valued at the system (community) level. When this occurs, it’s not just something that the “Alpha Beta’s” do; it becomes something that we—as a collective—do. Something we all place great value in. Ergo, student participation in these quality experiences becomes a shared expectation—a high standard that the community sets for itself and expects from all of its members and organizations.

**REFERENCES**


