# Student Involvement: A Developmental Theory for Higher Education

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*A student development theory based on student involvement is presented and described, and the implications for practice and research are discussed.*

Even a casual reading of the extensive literature on student development in higher education can create confusion and perplexity. One finds not only that the problems being studied are highly diverse but also that investigators who claim to be studying the same problem frequently do not look at the same variables or employ the same methodologies. And even when they are investigating the same variables, different investigators may use completely different terms to describe and discuss these variables.

My own interest in articulating a theory of student development is partly practical—I would like to bring some order into the chaos of the literature—and partly self-protective. I and increasingly bewildered by the muddle of findings that have emerged from my own research in student development, research that I have been engaged in for more than 20 years.

The theory of student involvement that I describe in this article appeals to me for several reasons. First, it is simple: I have not needed to draw a maze consisting of dozens of boxes interconnected by two-headed arrows to explain the basic elements of the theory to others. Second, the theory can explain most of the empirical knowledge about environmental influences on student development that researchers have gained over the years. Third, it is capable of embracing principles from such widely divergent sources as psychoanalysis and classical learning theory. Finally, this theory of student involvement can be used both by researchers to guide their investigation of student development—and by college administrators and faculty—to help them design more effective learning environments.

## BASIC ELEMENTS OF THE THEORY

Let me first explain what I mean by *involvement,* a construct that should not be either mysterious or esoteric. Quite simply, student involvement refers to the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience. Thus, a highly involved student is one who, for example, devotes considerable energy to studying, spends much time on campus, participates actively in student organizations, and interacts frequently with faculty members and other students. Conversely, a typical uninvolved student neglects studies, spends little time on campus, abstains from extracurricular activities, and has infrequent contact with faculty members or other students. These hypothetical examples are only intended to be illustrative; there are many other possible forms of involvement, which are discussed in detail below.

In certain respects the concept of involvement closely resembles the Freudian concept of *cathexis,* which I learned about in my former career as a clinical psychologist. Freud believed that people invest psychological energy in objects and persons outside of themselves. In other words, people can *cathect* on their friends, families, schoolwork, and jobs. The involvement concept also resembles closely what the learning theorists have traditionally referred to as *vigilance* or *time-on-task.* The concept of *effort,* although much narrower, has much in common with the concept of involvement.

To give a better sense of what I mean by the term *involvement*, I have listed below the results of several hours that I spent recently

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looking in dictionaries and a thesaurus for words or phrases that capture some of the intended meaning. Because involvement is, to me, an active term, the list uses verb forms.

attach oneself to
commit oneself to
devote oneself to
engage in
go in for
incline toward
join in
partake of
participate in
plunge into
show enthusiasm for
tackle
take a fancy to
take an interest in
take on
take part in
take to
take up
undertake

Most of these terms are behavioral in meaning. I could have also included words and phrases that are more "interior" in nature, such as *value, care for, stress, accentuate*, and *emphasize*. But in the sense that I am using the term, involvement implies a behavioral component. I am not denying that motivation is an important aspect of involvement, but rather I am emphasizing that the behavioral aspects, in my judgment, are critical: It is not so much what the individual thinks or feels, but what the individual does, how he or she behaves, that defines and identifies involvement.

At this stage in its development, the involvement theory has five basic postulates:

1. Involvement refers to the investment of physical and psychological energy in various objects. The objects may be highly generalized (the student experience) or highly specific (preparing for a chemistry examination).
2. Regardless of its object, involvement occurs along a continuum; that is, different students manifest different degrees of involvement in a given object, and the same student manifests different degrees of involvement in different objects at different times.
3. Involvement has both quantitative and qualitative features. The extent of a student's involvement in academic work, for instance, can be measured quantitatively (how many hours the student spends studying) and qualitatively (whether the student reviews and comprehends reading assignments or simply stares at the textbook and daydreams).
4. The amount of student learning and personal development associated with any educational program is directly proportional to the quality and quantity of student involvement in that program.
5. The effectiveness of any educational policy or practice is directly related to the capacity of that policy or practice to increase student involvement.

These last two propositions are, of course, the key educational postulates, because they provide clues for designing more effective educational programs for students. Strictly speaking, they do not really qualify as postulates, because they are subject to empirical proof. Indeed, much of the recommended research on involvement (discussed below) would be designed to test these two propositions.

## TRADITIONAL PEDAGOGICAL THEORIES

A major impetus for the development of the student involvement theory was my exasperation at the tendency of many academicians to treat the student as a kind of "black box." On the input end of this black box are the various policies and programs of a college or university; on the output end are various types of achievement measures such as the GPA or scores on standardized tests. It seemed that something was missing: some

mediating mechanism that would explain how these educational programs and policies are translated into student achievement and development.

I am not implying that the actions and policies of most faculty members and administrators are not guided by some kind of educational theory. But usually any such theory is only implicit in their actions; it is seldom stated formally or examined critically. Even when college personnel are aware of the theories that guide their actions, they seem to accept them as gospel rather than as testable propositions. In any event, it may be useful to examine these implicit pedagogical theories and to show how the theory of student involvement can help tie them more directly to student developmental outcomes. I have identified three implicit pedagogical theories, labeled for simplicity the *subject-matter*, the *resource,* and the *individualized* (or eclectic) theories.

## The Subject-Matter Theory

The subject-matter theory of pedagogy, which could also be labeled the *content theory,* is popular among college professors. According to this theory, student learning and development depend primarily on exposure to the right subject matter. Thus, a "liberal education" consists of an assortment of "worthwhile" courses. Individual courses, in turn, are evaluated in terms of the content reflected, for example, in course syllabi. Indeed, in most colleges and universities teaching performance is evaluated by inspecting the professor's course syllabi. Given this strong emphasis on course content, it is not surprising that proponents of this theory tend to believe that students learn by attending lectures, doing the reading assignments, and working in the library. To the extent that written and oral presentations by the student are used as learning tools, they generally focus on the content of the reading or the lecture.

In the subject-matter approach to learning, those professors with the greatest knowledge of a particular subject matter have the highest prestige. Indeed, because of this emphasis on specialized knowledge, this approach seems to encourage the fragmentation and specialization of faculty interests and to equate scholarly expertise with pedagogical ability.

But perhaps the most serious limitation of the subject-matter theory is that it assigns students a passive role in the learning process: The "knowledgeable" professor lectures to the "ignorant" student so that the student can acquire the same knowledge. Such an approach clearly favors highly motivated students and those who tend to be avid readers and good listeners. Students who are slow readers or who have no intrinsic interest in the subject matter of a particular course are not well served by this approach. In fact, recent attempts to expand educational opportunities for underprepared students have probably been hindered by the continued adherence of most faculty members to the subject-matter theory of learning (Astin, 1982).

## The Resource Theory

The resource theory of pedagogy is a favorite among administrators and policymakers. Used here, the term *resources* includes a wide range of ingredients believed to enhance student learning: physical facilities (laboratories, libraries, and audiovisual aids), human resources (well-trained faculty members, counselors, and support personnel), and fiscal resources (financial aid, endowments, and extramural research funds). In effect, the resource theory maintains that if adequate resources are brought together in one place, student learning and development will occur. Many college administrators believe that the acquisition of resources is their most important duty.

One resource measure that is particularly popular is the student-faculty ratio. Many administrators believe that the lower the ratio, the greater the learning and personal development that will occur. But the resource theory has qualitative as well as quantitative aspects, such as the belief that increasing the proportion of "high-quality" professors on the faculty (*quality* in this instance is defined primarily in terms of scholarly productivity and national visibility) will strengthen the educational environment. Actually, many research-oriented institutions could probably afford to hire more faculty members if

they were less committed to recruiting and retaining faculty members who are highly visible in their disciplines. In short, such policies involve a trade-off between quantity and quality.

The resource theory of pedagogy also tends to include the belief that high-achieving students are a resource, that large numbers of such students on the campus enhance the quality of the learning environment for all students. Acting on this belief, many institutions invest substantial financial resources in the recruitment of high-achieving students.

The resource theory has two principal limitations. First, certain resources, such as bright students and prestigious faculty, are finite. As a result, the institutional energies expended in recruiting high-achieving students and prestigious faculty serve merely to redistribute these finite resources rather than to add to the total pool of such resources. In other words, a successful faculty or student recruitment program may benefit a particular institution, but the benefit comes at the expense of other institutions. As a consequence, widespread acceptance of the resource theory as it applies to faculty and students tends, paradoxically, to reduce the total resources available to the entire higher education community.

The second problem with this approach is its focus on the mere accumulation of resources with little attention given to the use or deployment of such resources. For instance, having established a multimillion-volume library, the administration may neglect to find out whether students are making effective use of that library. Similarly, having successfully recruited a faculty "star," the college may pay little attention to whether the new faculty member works effectively with students.

### The Individualized (Eclectic) Theory

The individualized theory—a favorite of many developmental and learning psychologists (Chickering & Associates, 1981)—assumes that no single approach to subject matter, teaching, or resource allocation is adequate for all students. Rather, it attempts to identify the curricular content and instructional methods that best meet the needs of the individual student. With its emphasis on borrowing what is most useful from other pedagogical approaches, this flexible approach could also be termed *eclectic*.

In contrast to the subject-matter approach, which generally results in a fixed set of curricular requirements (i.e., courses that all students must take), the individualized approach emphasizes electives. Most college curricula represent a mixture of the subject-matter and individualized theories; that is, students must take certain required courses or satisfy certain distributional requirements but also have the option of taking a certain number of elective courses.

But the individualized theory goes far beyond curriculum. It emphasizes, for instance, the importance to the student of advising and counseling and of independent study. The philosophy underlying most student personnel work (guidance, counseling, selective placement, and student support services) implicitly incorporates the individualized or eclectic theory of student development.

The individualized approach is also associated with particular instructional techniques such as self-paced instruction. This theory has led some educators to espouse the "competency-based" learning model (Grant et al., 1979), whereby common learning objectives (competencies) are formulated for all students, but the time allowed to reach these objectives is highly variable and the instructional techniques used are highly individualized.

The most obvious limitation of the individualized theory is that it can be extremely expensive to implement, because each student normally requires considerable individualized attention. In addition, because there are virtually no limitations to the possible variations in subject matter and pedagogical approach, the individualized theory is difficult to define with precision. Furthermore, given the state of research on learning, it is currently impossible to specify which types of educational programs or teaching techniques are most effective with which types of learners. In other words, although the theory is appealing in the abstract, it is extremely difficult to put into practice.

## THE PLACE OF THE THEORY OF STUDENT INVOLVEMENT

In what way does the theory of student involvement relate to these traditional pedagogical theories? I believe that it can provide a link between the variables emphasized in these theories (subject matter, resources, and individualization of approach) and the learning outcomes desired by the student and the professor. In other words, the theory of student involvement argues that a particular curriculum, to achieve the effects intended, must elicit sufficient student effort and investment of energy to bring about the desired learning and development. Simply exposing the student to a particular set of courses may or may not work. The theory of involvement, in other words, provides a conceptual substitute for the black box that is implicit in the three traditional pedagogical theories.

The content theory, in particular, tends to place students in a passive role as recipients of information. The theory of involvement, on the other hand, emphasizes active participation of the student in the learning process. Recent research at the precollegiate level (Rosenshine, 1982) has suggested that learning will be greatest when the learning environment is structured to encourage active participation by the student.

On a more subtle level, the theory of student involvement encourages educators to focus less on what they do and more on what the student does: how motivated the student is and how much time and energy the student devotes to the learning process. The theory assumes that student learning and development will not be impressive if educators focus most of their attention on course content, teaching techniques, laboratories, books, and other resources. With this approach, student involvement—rather than the resources or techniques typically used by educators—becomes the focus of concern.

Thus, the construct of student involvement in certain respects resembles a more common construct in psychology: *motivation*. I personally prefer the term involvement, however, because it implies more than just a psychological state; it connotes the behavioral manifestation of that state. Involvement, in other words, is more susceptible to direct observation and measurement than is the more abstract psychological construct of motivation. Moreover, involvement seems to be a more useful construct for educational practitioners. "How do you motivate students?" is probably a more difficult question to answer than "How do you get students involved?"

The theory of student involvement is qualitatively different from the developmental theories that have received so much attention in the literature of higher education during the past few years. These theories are of at least two types: those that postulate a series of hierarchically arranged developmental stages (e.g., Heath, 1968; Kohlberg, 1971; Loevinger, 1966; Perry, 1970) and those that view student development in multidimensional terms (e.g., Brown & DeCoster, 1982; Chickering, 1969). (For recent, comprehensive summaries of these theories see Chickering & Associates, 1981; Hanson, 1982.)

Whereas these theories focus primarily on developmental outcomes (the *what* of student development), the theory of student involvement is more concerned with the behavioral mechanisms or processes that facilitate student development (the *how* of student development). These two types of theories can be studied simultaneously (see "Research Possibilities" section below).

### Student Time as a Resource

College administrators are constantly preoccupied with the accumulation and allocation of fiscal resources; the theory of student involvement, however, suggests that the most precious institutional resource may be student time. According to the theory, the extent to which students can achieve particular developmental goals is a direct function of the time and effort they devote to activities designed to produce these gains. For example, if increased knowledge and understanding of history is an important goal for history majors, the extent to which students reach this goal is a direct function of the time they spend at such activities as listening to professors talk about history, reading books about history, and discussing history with other students. Generally, the more time students spend

in these activities, the more history they learn.

The theory of student involvement explicitly acknowledges that the psychic and physical time and energy of students are finite. Thus, educators are competing with other forces in the student's life for a share of that finite time and energy. Here are the basic ingredients of a so-called "zero-sum" game, in which the time and energy that the student invests in family, friends, job, and other outside activities represent a reduction in the time and energy the student has to devote to educational development.

Administrators and faculty members must recognize that virtually every institutional policy and practice (e.g., class schedules; regulations on class attendance, academic probation, and participation in honors courses; policies on office hours for faculty, student orientation, and advising) can affect the way students spend their time and the amount of effort they devote to academic pursuits. Moreover, administrative decisions about many nonacademic issues (e.g., the location of new buildings such as dormitories and student unions; rules governing residency; the design of recreational and living facilities; on-campus employment opportunities; number and type of extracurricular activities and regulations regarding participation; the frequency, type, and cost of cultural events; roommate assignments; financial aid policies; the relative attractiveness of eating facilities on and off campus; parking regulations) can significantly affect how students spend their time and energy.

## RELEVANT RESEARCH

The theory of student involvement has its roots in a longitudinal study of college dropouts (Astin, 1975) that endeavored to identify factors in the college environment that significantly affect the student's persistence in college. It turned out that virtually every significant effect could be rationalized in terms of the involvement concept; that is, every positive factor was likely to increase student involvement in the undergraduate experience, whereas every negative factor was likely to reduce involvement. In other words, the factors that contributed to the student's remaining in college suggested involvement, whereas those that contributed to the student's dropping out implied a lack of involvement.

What were these significant environmental factors? Probably the most important and pervasive was the student's residence. Living in a campus residence was positively related to retention, and this positive effect occurred in all types of institutions and among all types of students regardless of sex, race, ability, or family background. Similar results had been obtained in earlier studies (Astin, 1973; Chickering, 1974) and have been subsequently replicated (Astin, 1977, 1982). It is obvious that students who live in residence halls have more time and opportunity to get involved in all aspects of campus life. Indeed, simply by eating, sleeping, and spending their waking hours on the college campus, residential students have a better chance than do commuter students of developing a strong identification and attachment to undergraduate life.

The longitudinal study also showed that students who join social fraternities or sororities or participate in extracurricular activities of almost any type are less likely to drop out. Participation in sports, particularly intercollegiate sports, has an especially pronounced, positive effect on persistence. Other activities that enhance retention include enrollment in honors programs, involvement in ROTC, and participation in professors' undergraduate research projects.

One of the most interesting environmental factors that affected retention was holding a part-time job on campus. Although it might seem that working while attending college takes time and energy away from academic pursuits, part-time employment in an on-campus job actually facilitates retention. Apparently such work, which also includes work-study combinations, operates in much the same way as residential living: The student is spending time on the campus, thus increasing the likelihood that he or she will come into contact with other students, professors, and college staff. On a more subtle psychological level, relying on the college as a source of income can result in a greater sense of attachment to the college.

Retention suffers, however, if the student

works off campus at a full-time job. Because the student is spending considerable time and energy on nonacademic activities that are usually unrelated to student life, full-time work off campus decreases the time and energy that the student can devote to studies and other campus activities.

Findings concerning the effects of different types of colleges are also relevant to the theory of involvement. Thus, the most consistent finding—reported in almost every longitudinal study of student development—is that the student's chances of dropping out are substantially greater at a 2-year college than at a 4-year college. The negative effects of attending a community college are observed even after the variables of entering student characteristics and lack of residence and work are considered (Astin, 1975, 1977). Community colleges are places where the involvement of both faculty and students seems to be minimal. Most (if not all) students are commuters, and a large proportion attend college on a part-time basis (thus, they presumably manifest less involvement simply because of their part-time status). Similarly, a large proportion of faculty members are employed on a part-time basis.

The 1975 study of dropouts also produced some interesting findings regarding the "fit" between student and college: Students are more likely to persist at religious colleges if their own religious backgrounds are similar; Blacks are more likely to persist at Black colleges than at White colleges; and students from small towns are more likely to persist in small than in large colleges. The origin of such effects probably lies in the student's ability to identify with the institution. It is easier to become involved when one can identify with the college environment.

Further support for the involvement theory can be found by examining the reasons that students give for dropping out of college. For men the most common reason is boredom with courses, clearly implying a lack of involvement. The most common reason for women is marriage, pregnancy, or other responsibilities, a set of competing objects that drain away the time and energy that women could otherwise devote to being students.

The persister-dropout phenomenon provides an ideal paradigm for studying student involvement. Thus, if we conceive of involvement as occurring along a continuum, the act of dropping out can be viewed as the ultimate form of noninvolvement, and dropping out anchors the involvement continuum at the lowest end.

Because of the apparent usefulness of the involvement theory as it applied to the earlier research on dropping out, I decided to investigate the involvement phenomenon more intensively by studying the impact of college on a wide range of other outcomes (Astin, 1977). This study, which used longitudinal data on several samples totaling more than 200,000 students and examined more than 80 different student outcomes, focused on the effects of several different types of involvement: place of residence, honors programs, undergraduate research participation, social fraternities and sororities, academic involvement, student-faculty interaction, athletic involvement, and involvement in student government. In understanding the effects of these various forms of involvement it is important to keep in mind the overall results of this study: College attendance in general seems to strengthen students' competency, self-esteem, artistic interests, liberalism, hedonism, and religious apostasy and to weaken their business interests.

Perhaps the most important general conclusion I reached from this elaborate analysis was that nearly all forms of student involvement are associated with greater than average changes in entering freshman characteristics. And for certain student outcomes involvement is more strongly associated with change than either entering freshman characteristics or institutional characteristics. The following is a summary of the results for specific forms of involvement.

## Place of Residence

Leaving home to attend college has significant effects on most college outcomes. Students who live in campus residences are much more likely than commuter students to become less religious and more hedonistic. Residents also show greater gains than commuters in artistic interests, liberalism, and interpersonal self-esteem. Living in a dormitory is positively associated with

several other forms of involvement: interaction with faculty, involvement in student government, and participation in social fraternities or sororities.

Living on campus substantially increases the student's chances of persisting and of aspiring to a graduate or professional degree. Residents are more likely than commuters to achieve in such extracurricular areas as leadership and athletics and to express satisfaction with their undergraduate experience, particularly in the areas of student friendships, faculty-student relations, institutional reputation, and social life.

### Honors Programs

Students who participate in honors programs gain substantially in interpersonal self-esteem, intellectual self-esteem, and artistic interests. They are more likely than other students to persist in college and to aspire to graduate and professional degrees. Honors participation is positively related to student satisfaction in three areas—quality of the science program, closeness to faculty, and quality of instruction-and negatively related to satisfaction with friendships and with the institution's academic reputation. These findings suggest that honors participation enhances faculty—student relationships but may isolate students from their peers.

### Academic Involvement

Defined as a complex of self-reported traits and behaviors (e.g., the extent to which students work hard at their studies, the number of hours they spend studying, the degree of interest in their courses, good study habits), academic involvement produces an unusual pattern of effects. Intense academic involvement tends to retard those changes in personality and behavior that normally result from college attendance. Thus, students who are deeply involved academically are less likely than average students to show increases in liberalism, hedonism, artistic interests, and religious apostasy or decreases in business interests. The only personality change accentuated by academic involvement is need for status, which is strengthened. Being academically involved is strongly related to satisfaction with all aspects of college life except friendships with other students.

This pattern reinforces the hypothesis that students who become intensely involved in their college studies tend to become isolated from their peers and, consequently, are less susceptible to the peer group influences that seem critical to the development of political liberalism, hedonism, and religious apostasy. On the other hand, they experience considerable satisfaction, perhaps because of the many institutional rewards for good academic performance.

### Student-Faculty Interaction

Frequent interaction with faculty is more strongly related to satisfaction with college than any other type of involvement or, indeed, any other student or institutional characteristic. Students who interact frequently with faculty members are more likely than other students to express satisfaction with all aspects of their institutional experience, including student friendships, variety of courses, intellectual environment, and even the administration of the institution. Thus, finding ways to encourage greater student involvement with faculty (and vice versa) could be a highly productive activity on most college campuses.

### Athletic Involvement

The pattern of effects associated with involvement in athletic activities closely parallels the pattern associated with academic involvement; that is, students who become intensely involved in athletic activities show smaller than average increases in political liberalism, religious apostasy, and artistic interests and a smaller than average decrease in business interests. Athletic involvement is also associated with satisfaction in four areas: the institution's academic reputation, the intellectual environment, student friendships, and institutional administration. These results suggest that athletic involvement, like academic involvement, tends to isolate students from the peer group effects that normally accompany college attendance. For the studious person, this isolation results from the time and effort devoted to studying. For the athlete, the isolation probably results from long practice hours, travel to athletic competitions, and special living quarters.

### Involvement in Student Government

Involvement in student government is associated with greater than average increases in political liberalism, hedonism, artistic interests, and status needs as well as greater than average satisfaction with student friendships. This pattern of relationships supports the hypothesis that the changes in attitudes and behavior that usually accompany college attendance are attributable to peer-group effects. That is, students who become actively involved in student government interact frequently with their peers, and this interaction seems to accentuate the changes normally resulting from the college experience.

### Research on Cognitive Development

Although most research on classroom learning has been carried out at the precollegiate level, most of the evidence from this research strongly supports the concept of involvement as a critical element in the learning process. The concepts of time-on-task and effort, for example, appear frequently in the literature as key determinants of a wide range of cognitive learning outcomes (Bloom, 1974; Fisher et al., 1980; Gagne, 1977).

## PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

There are several implications of the theory of involvement for practitioners in higher education. Some of the possible uses that could be made of the theory by faculty, administrators, and student personnel workers are briefly described below.

### Faculty and Administrators

As already suggested, the content and resource approaches to pedagogy tend to favor the well-prepared, assertive student. In contrast, the concept of student involvement emphasizes giving greater attention to the passive, reticent, or unprepared student. Of course, not all passive students are uninvolved in their academic work, nor are they necessarily experiencing academic difficulties. But passivity is an important warning sign that may reflect a lack of involvement.

Perhaps the most important application of the student involvement theory to teaching is that it encourages the instructor to focus less on content and teaching techniques and more on what students are actually doing—how motivated they are and how much time and energy they are devoting to the learning process. Teaching is a complex art. And, like other art forms, it may suffer if the artist focuses exclusively on technique. Instructors can be more effective if they focus on the intended outcomes of their pedagogical efforts: achieving maximum student involvement and learning. (Final examinations monitor learning, but they come too late in the learning process to have much value for the individual student.)

The art-form analogy can perhaps be better illustrated with an example from sports. Any professional baseball player will confirm that the best way to develop skill in pitching is to focus not on the mechanics but on the intended results: getting the ball over the plate. If the player overemphasizes such techniques as the grip, the stance, the windup, and the kick without attending to where the ball goes, he will probably never learn to pitch well. In fact, the technique involved in pitching a baseball, shooting a basketball, or hitting a golf ball is really unimportant as long as the ball goes where the player wants it to. If the ball fails to behave as intended, then the player begins to worry about adjusting his or her technique.

In education, teachers and administrators often concentrate on their own techniques or processes and thus ignore or overlook what is going on with the student. I believe that the involvement approach has the advantage of encouraging educators to focus more on what the student is actually doing.

### Counselors and Student Personnel Workers

If an institution commits itself to achieving maximum student involvement, counselors and other student personnel workers will probably occupy a more important role in institutional operations. Because student personnel workers frequently operate on a one-to-one basis with students, they are in a unique position to monitor the involvement of their clients in the academic process and to work with individual clients in an attempt to increase that involvement. One of the challenges confronting student personnel

workers these days is to find a "hook" that will stimulate students to get more involved in the college experience: taking a different array of courses, changing residential situations, joining student organizations, participating in various kinds of extracurricular activities, or finding new peer groups.

The theory of involvement also provides a useful frame of reference for working with students who are having academic difficulties. Perhaps the first task in working with such students is to understand the principal objects on which their energies are focused. It might be helpful, for example, to ask the student to keep a detailed diary, showing the time spent in various activities such as studying, sleeping, socializing, daydreaming, working, and commuting. From such a diary the counselor can identify the principal activities in which the student is currently involved and the objects of cathexis and can then determine if the academic difficulties stem from competing involvements, poor study habits, lack of motivation, or some combination of these factors.

In short, the theory of student involvement provides a unifying construct that can help to focus the energies of all institutional personnel on a common objective.

## RESEARCH POSSIBILITIES

My research over the past several years, applying the theory of student involvement, has generated many ideas for further research. There are possibilities not only for testing the theory itself but also for exploring educational ideas that grow out of the theory. The following are just a few examples of the kinds of research that could be undertaken.

### Assessing Different Forms of Involvement

Clearly, one of the most important next steps in developing and testing the involvement theory is to explore ways of assessing different forms of involvement. As already suggested, a time diary could be valuable in determining the relative importance of various objects and activities to the student. Judging from my first attempt to develop time diaries (Astin, 1968), students vary considerably in the amount of time they spend on such diverse activities as studying, socializing, sleeping, daydreaming, and traveling. It would also be useful to assess how frequently students interact with each other, with faculty members and other institutional personnel, and with people outside the institution. In addition, it is important not only to identify the extracurricular activities in which the student participates but also to assess the time and energy that the student devotes to each activity.

### Quality Versus Quantity

My colleague, C. Robert Pace, has developed an extensive battery of devices to assess the quality of effort that students devote to various activities (Pace, 1982). A number of research questions arise in connection with the quality versus quantity issue: To what extent can high-quality involvement compensate for lack of quantity? Can students be encouraged to use time more wisely? To what extent does low-quality involvement reflect such obstacles as lack of motivation and personal problems?

### Involvement and Developmental Outcomes

The research reviewed earlier (Astin, 1977) suggests that different forms of involvement lead to different developmental outcomes. The connection between particular forms of involvement and particular outcomes is an important question that should be addressed in future research. For example, do particular forms of involvement facilitate student development along the various dimensions postulated by theorists such as Chickering (1969), Loevinger (1966), Heath (1968), Perry (1970), and Kohlberg (1971)? It would also be useful to determine whether particular student characteristics (e.g., socioeconomic status, academic preparation, sex) are significantly related to different forms of involvement and whether a given form of involvement produces different outcomes for different types of students.

### The Role of Peer Groups

Considerable research at the precollegiate level suggests that the student's commitment of time and energy to academic work can be strongly

influenced by student peers (Coleman, 1961; McDill & Rigsby, 1973). It would be useful to determine whether similar relationships exist at the postsecondary level and, in particular, whether different types of student peer groups can be consciously used to enhance student involvement in the learning process.

### Attribution and Locus of Control

In recent years learning and developmental theorists have shown an increasing interest in the concepts of *locus of control* (Rotter, 1966) and *attribution* (Weiner, 1979). Considerable research, for example, suggests that students' degree of involvement in learning tasks can be influenced by whether they believe that their behavior is controlled by internal or by external factors. Weiner (1979) argued that even if students tend to view their locus of control as internal, involvement may be further contingent on whether the internal factors are controllable (e.g., dependent on effort) or uncontrollable (e.g., dependent on ability). It seems clear that the effectiveness of any attempt to increase student involvement is highly contingent on the student's perceived locus of control and attributional inclinations.

### Other Questions

Other questions that could be explored in future research on the involvement theory include the following:

*Exceptions to the rule.* What are the characteristics of highly involved students who drop out? What are the characteristics of uninvolved students who nonetheless manage to persist in college? Are there particular developmental outcomes for which a high degree of involvement is contraindicated?

*Temporal patterns of involvement.* Two students may devote the same total amount of time and energy to a task but may distribute their time in very different ways. For example, one student preparing a term paper may work for 1 hour each night over a period of 2 weeks; another may stay up all night to do the paper. What are the developmental consequences of these different patterns?

*Combining different forms of involvement.* How do different forms of involvement interact? Does one form of involvement (e.g., in extracurricular activities) enhance or diminish the effects of another form (e.g., in academic work)? What are the ideal combinations that facilitate maximum learning and personal development?

*Desirable limits to involvement.* Although the theory of involvement generally holds that "more is better," there are probably limits beyond which increasing involvement ceases to produce desirable results and can even become counterproductive. Examples of excessive involvement are the "workaholic," the academic "grind," and others who manifest obsessive-compulsive behavior. What are the ideal upper limits for various forms of involvement? Are problems more likely to develop if the student is excessively involved in a single object (e.g., academic work) rather than in a variety of objects (e.g., academic work, part-time job, extracurricular activities, social activities, and political activities)?

*Epidemiology of involvement.* Can student involvement be increased if professors interact more with students? Can administrators bring about greater faculty-student interaction by setting an example themselves? Does focusing on student involvement as a common institutional goal tend to break down traditional status barriers between faculty and student personnel workers?

## SUMMARY

I have presented a theory of student development, labeled the *student involvement theory*, which I believe is both simple and comprehensive. This theory not only elucidates the considerable findings that have emerged from decades of research on student development; it also offers educators a tool for designing more effective learning environments.

*Student involvement* refers to the quantity and quality of the physical and psychological energy that students invest in the college experience. Such involvement takes many forms, such as absorption in academic work, participation in extracurricular activities, and interaction with faculty and other institutional personnel. According to the theory, the greater

the student's involvement in college, the greater will be the amount of student learning and personal development. Front the standpoint of the educator, the most important hypothesis in the theory is that the effectiveness of any educational policy or practice is directly related to the capacity of that policy or practice to increase student involvement.

The principal advantage of the student involvement theory over traditional pedagogical approaches (including the subject-matter, the resource, and the individualized or eclectic theories) is that it directs attention away from subject matter and technique and toward the motivation and behavior of the student. It views student time and energy as institutional resources, albeit finite resources. Thus, all institutional policies and practices—those relating to non-academic as well as academic matters—can be evaluated in terms of the degree to which they increase or reduce student involvement. Similarly, all college personnel—counselors and student personnel workers as well as faculty and administrators—can assess their own activities in terms of their success in encouraging students to become more involved in the college experience.

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