

1-2-2017

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Recommended Citation

Dostaler, Isabelle; Robinson, Melanie A.; and Tomberlin, Thomas J. (2017) "A Focus on Engagement: Defining, Measuring, and Nurturing a Key Pillar of AACSB Standards," *Organization Management Journal*: Vol. 14: Iss. 1, Article 6.

Available at: <https://scholarship.shu.edu/omj/vol14/iss1/6>

A Focus on Engagement: Defining, Measuring, and Nurturing a Key Pillar of AACSB Standards

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ABSTRACT

The 2013 Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) Standards emphasize three “pillars” upon which schools accredited by the association must regularly demonstrate quality improvement, namely, impact, innovation, and engagement. Focusing on the last of these, our article examines the concept of engagement through both a content analysis of the 2013 AACSB Standards and an empirical study exploring different types of course-level engagement within an undergraduate business course (measured using the Student Course Engagement Questionnaire; Handelsman, Briggs, Sullivan, & Towler, 2005). The results of our content analysis of the 2013 AACSB Standards underscore the focus placed on engagement within the AACSB documentation. However, it is also noted that the definition of engagement within the AACSB Standards is somewhat vague. The findings of our empirical study ($N = 142$) suggest that students were engaged in the course and that three of the four types of engagement measured (skills, participation/interaction, and performance engagement) were positively correlated with final performance in the course.

KEYWORDS

AACSB standards; course performance; engagement

Schools accredited by the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) are required to regularly evaluate the extent to which students achieve the learning goals of the programs in which they study. In AACSB vocabulary, this process is referred to as assessment of learning (AOL). Assessment should not be performed just for the sake of assessment, but should lead to “loop closure” (Better-Reed, Nitkin, & Sampson, 2008; Rexeisen & Garrison, 2013). A loop is “closed” when action is taken to correct a situation that is believed to have led to a level of learning goal achievement that does not meet a given threshold. Corrective actions can be incremental, such as the addition of reading materials or in-class activities in specific courses, or may involve substantial changes, such as major curriculum redesigns.

As required by the AACSB standards, learning goals are evaluated twice during each 5-year cycle. A typical learning goal of graduate and undergraduate business programs is the ability to apply core concepts from key business disciplines such as accounting, finance, marketing, human resources management, and so on. In the business school of one of the authors, course coordinators from different disciplines meet to discuss the results of the assessment of the “core concept application” learning goal as soon as they are available. This

loop closure practice was instituted to help break functional silos and trigger valuable exchanges between faculty members, leading to the identification of corrective actions that could be undertaken. At a recent meeting during which course coordinators examined assessment results that were particularly poor, course attendance and student engagement quickly emerged as significant issues. Course coordinators noted that attendance is high at the beginning of the term but that it is often challenging to keep the interest of students until the last day of classes. The discussion held during that meeting triggered our interest in student engagement. We wondered why several students systematically missed classes during the second half of the academic term and whether absenteeism from classes is a sign of poor engagement. If this were the case, could something be done to favor engagement and make sure that our students better achieve the learning objectives of the business programs in which they are enrolled? And, more fundamentally, what does engagement mean?

We initially tried to find an answer to this central question in the AACSB standards themselves, given that engagement is identified by the association as one of the pillars of high-quality management education. While the notion of engagement is mentioned in most of the 15 standards, we realized that it is not

clearly defined. We then proceeded to examine the literature on student engagement and were able to find a useful framework that served as a base for a survey that we conducted in a large, multisection undergraduate business course. Our results indicate that students were engaged in the course and that three of the four types of engagement assessed (namely, skills, participation/interaction, and performance engagement) were positively correlated with final performance in the course. These findings suggest that it may be beneficial for AACSB-accredited schools to develop a clear definition of engagement and to pay particular attention to fostering various types of engagement in students. This, in turn, could favor the achievement of the learning goals of the programs offered by the schools.

Engagement in the 2013 AACSB Standards

The most recent AACSB Standards (the 2013 Standards) were adopted on April 8, 2013, during the International Conference and Annual Meeting (ICAM). Speakers at ICAM 2013 repeatedly mentioned that a major difference between the 2003 and the 2013 Standards was the recognition of three “pillars” of continuous quality improvement in management education: engagement, innovation, and impact. These three words were also added to the cover page of 2013 Eligibility Procedures and Accreditation Standards for Business Accreditation document.

The 15 AACSB business standards are clearly described within this document. Each contains a definitions section, followed by the detailed presentation of the basis on which judgment will be made as to whether or not business schools have met the standard, together with specific guidance for schools on how to prepare their documentation. In contrast, the notions of engagement, innovation, and impact seem to be diffused across the standards with no clear guidance on how schools can demonstrate that they are engaged, that they do innovate, and that they have an impact.

Given this, we set out to perform a content analysis of the AACSB 2013 Standards to get a better understanding of the meaning of engagement and of how engagement can be demonstrated. We first performed a basic search and found that the words “engagement,” “engage,” “engaged,” and “engages” are mentioned 78 times within the 2013 Standards, as indicated in Tables 1 and 2. Unsurprisingly, the words appear most often in Standard 15 (Faculty Qualification and Engagement) and Standard 13 (Student Academic and Professional Engagement). However, engagement is not mentioned at all in Standard 10 (Student–Faculty Interactions).

Table 1. Total word occurrence.

Word	Occurrence
Number of times the word “engagement” is mentioned	65
Number of times the word “engage” is mentioned	6
Number of times the word “engaged” is mentioned	5
Number of times the word “engages” is mentioned	2
Total	78

Table 2. Word occurrence in each standard.

Standards for Business Accreditation	Word* occurrence
Introduction	1
Preamble: Engagement, Innovation, and Impact	5
Section 1	
Eligibility Criteria for AACSB International Accreditation	5
Section 2A: Strategic Management and Innovation	
Introduction	1
Standard 1: Mission, Impact, and Innovation	2
Standard 2: Intellectual Contributions, Impact, and Alignment With Mission	1
Standard 3: Financial Strategies and Allocation of Resources	0
Section 2B: Participants—Students, Faculty, and Professional Staff	
Introduction	0
Standard 4: Students Admissions, Progression, and Career Development	0
Standard 5: Faculty Sufficiency and Deployment	3
Standard 6: Faculty Management and Support	1
Standard 7: Professional Staff Sufficiency and Deployment	0
Section 2C: Learning and Teaching	
Introduction	3
Standard 8: Curricula Management and Assurance of Learning	1
Standard 9: Curriculum Content	0
Standard 10: Student-Faculty Interactions	0
Standard 11: Degree Program Educational Level, Structure, and Equivalence	2
Standard 12: Teaching Effectiveness	1
Section 2D: Academic and Professional Engagement	1
Introduction	5
Standard 13: Student Academic and Professional Engagement	9
Standard 14: Executive Education	1
Standard 15: Faculty Qualification and Engagement	36
Total	78

*Engagement, engage, engaged, engages.

Thus, the first finding of our content analysis is that although the words “engagement,” “engage,” “engaged,” and “engages” are mentioned a considerable number of times in the 52-page document presenting the 2013 AACSB Standards, the concept of engagement is not explicitly defined and seems to be considered self-explanatory. The following excerpt from the Preamble is particularly telling in this regard:

Effective business education and research can be achieved with different balances of academic and professional engagement. However, quality business education cannot be achieved when either academic or professional engagement is absent, or when they do not intersect in meaningful ways. Accreditation should encourage an appropriate intersection of academic and professional engagement that is consistent with quality in the context of a school’s mission. (AACSB Standards, 2016, p. 3)

Business schools that aspire to be accredited are forcefully told that it is crucial to be engaged, yet the meaning of engagement is not explicitly specified, beyond the mention that it can be either “professional” or “academic” and that the two types of engagement should intersect.

We further explored the 2013 Standards by extracting all of the sentences in which the words “engagement,” “engage,” “engaged,” and “engages” were mentioned to identify the nature of the engagement alluded to, as well as the actors referred to in each mention. This examination was therefore driven by three questions: Who is engaged? Engaged in what? Engaged with whom?

According to the AACSB 2013 Standards, faculty members are the leading actors of engagement. As indicated in Table 3, faculty engagement is mentioned 31 times within the 2013 Standards, followed by student engagement, which is referred to 13 times. Unsurprisingly, faculty engagement is mentioned most often in Standard 15 (Faculty Qualification and Engagement) while student engagement is referred to most frequently in Standard 13 (Student Academic and Professional Engagement). The supporting role of staff (including professional staff) and administrators is illustrated by the fact that each is mentioned once with regard to engagement. The engagement of the school as a whole is mentioned three times within the 2013 Standards, in places where it could be expected: in the section on eligibility criteria, as well as in Standard 1 (Mission, Impact, and Innovation) and Standard 11 (Degree Program Educational Level, Structure, and Equivalence). Some of the engaged actors are external to the schools, such as practitioners and business leaders,

whereas stakeholders could include internal and external engaged actors. As indicated in Table 4, the work and activities in which actors should be engaged can be external to the school (e.g., community or civic engagement and sustainability issues), but most are internal. To meet the AACSB Accreditation Standards, faculty should be engaged in the production of intellectual contributions and they should ensure that a high-quality learning experience is offered to students; students, in turn, should be actively engaged in the learning process. University governance, mission and strategy development, and faculty evaluation and promotion process are other areas in which faculty members are expected to be engaged.

We conclude our content analysis by looking at who is engaged with whom. As indicated in Table 5, the 2013 Standards explicitly refer to some level of engagement between most of the actors listed in Table 3, except for professional staff and stakeholders. It is interesting to note that the engagement between students and business leaders is expected to happen in the context of experiential learning opportunities, as illustrated by the following extract from Standard 13 (Student Academic and Professional Engagement):

For any teaching and learning model employed, the school provides a portfolio of experiential learning opportunities for business students, through either formal coursework or extracurricular activities, which allow them to engage with faculty and active business leaders. These experiential learning activities provide exposure to business and management in both local and global contexts. (AACSB Standards, 2016, p. 39)

Table 3. Who is engaged?

Actors	Where (and how often) is actor engagement mentioned
Faculty (31 mentions)	Eligibility criteria for AACSB International Accreditation (3) Standard 2: Intellectual Contributions, Impact, and Alignment with Mission (1) Standard 5: Faculty Sufficiency and Deployment (1) Standard 6: Faculty Management and Support (1) Standard 8: Curricula Management and Assurance of Learning (1) Standard 12: Teaching Effectiveness (1) Introduction to Section 2D: Academic and Professional Engagement (1) Standard 15: Faculty Qualification and Engagement (22)
Students (13 mentions)	Eligibility criteria for AACSB International Accreditation (2) Introduction to Section 2C: Learning and Teaching (2) Introduction to Section 2D: Academic and Professional Engagement (1) Standard 13: Student Academic and Professional Engagement (7) Standard 15: Faculty Qualification and Engagement (1)
Staff (1 mention) Professional staff (1 mention) Administrators (1 mention) Schools (3 mentions)	Standard 8: Curricula Management and Assurance of Learning (1) Standard 12: Teaching Effectiveness (1) Eligibility criteria for AACSB International Accreditation (1) Eligibility criteria for AACSB International Accreditation (1) Standard 1: Mission, Impact, and Innovation Standard 11: Degree Program Educational Level, Structure, and Equivalence (1)
Practitioners (2 mentions)	Eligibility criteria for AACSB International Accreditation (1) Standard 15: Faculty Qualification and Engagement (1)
Business leaders (1 mention) Appropriate stakeholders (2 mentions)	Standard 13: Student Academic and Professional Engagement (1) Introduction to Section 2A: Strategic Management and Innovation (1) Standard 1: Mission, Impact, and Innovation (1)

explore different forms of student engagement within the context of a multisection undergraduate business course, as well as the correlation between each type of engagement and final performance in the class.

The literature on student engagement

Several authors have noted that student engagement is defined in many ways within the literature (e.g., Appleton, Christenson, & Furlong, 2008; Axelson & Flick, 2011; Bryson, 2014; Handelsman, Briggs, Sullivan, & Towler, 2005; Reschly & Christenson, 2012; Steele & Fullager, 2009). This literature includes multiple frameworks (e.g., Bryson, 2014) and conceptualizations of engagement, which can also differ with respect to the number of dimensions posited to underlie the construct (e.g., Appleton et al., 2008; Reschly & Christenson, 2012).

One of the most renowned tools to evaluate student engagement is the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), which is a large-scale study that collects data on student engagement from numerous Canadian and U.S. colleges and universities each year (e.g., Kuh, 2001; National Survey of Student Engagement, 2016a). The survey was initially developed by a group of academics, concerned about the focus of colleges and universities on “sometimes sensationalized rankings,” who obtained the support of the Pew Charitable Trusts (Kuh, 2001, p. 12). The objective of these scholars was to gain some insights into the resources that are invested by colleges and universities to facilitate significant learning experiences and instructional practices that demonstrate student engagement and success (Kuh, 2001). According to the NSSE:

Student engagement represents two critical features of collegiate quality. The first is the amount of time and effort students put into their studies and other educationally purposeful activities. The second is how the institution deploys its resources and organizes the curriculum and other learning opportunities to get students to participate in activities that decades of research studies show are linked to student learning. (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2016a, About NSSE section, para. 1)

We note that the first part of the definition concentrates on the students themselves (how much effort they put into their studies), while the second part is more focused on the institution. This double focus on student and institution is in keeping with the AACSB Standards, as revealed by the content analysis presented earlier in the article.

The NSSE has identified a series of “high-impact practices” that have the potential to strongly influence

engagement. While these are grouped into six categories on the NSSE website, Kuh (2008) specifies 10, including “first year seminars and experiences,” “common intellectual experiences” (p. 9), “learning communities,” “writing intensive courses,” “collaborative assignments and projects,” “undergraduate research,” “diversity/global learning” (p. 10), “service learning, community-based learning,” “internships,” and, finally, “capstone courses and projects” (p. 11). The NSSE has also developed a series of “engagement indicators,” which have been grouped into four categories, labeled (a) “academic challenge,” (b) “learning with peers,” (c) “experiences with faculty,” and (d) “campus environment” (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2016b, NSSE Findings: Engagement Indicators section). These high-impact practices and engagement indicators thus suggest ways in which institutions and educators may foster engagement. In fact, Kuh (2009) notes that a main purpose of the survey is “to provide high-quality, actionable data that institutions can use to improve the undergraduate experience” (p. 9). Such data can prove useful for schools trying to meet the AACSB Standards.

Importantly, research indicates that engagement can have important effects on several student-related outcomes in higher education. As examples, Carini, Kuh, and Klein (2006) found a positive association between engagement (more specifically, “for 9 of the 11 engagement scales” assessed with items from the NSSE) and the grade-point average of participants (p. 13). Svanum and Bigatti (2009) found engagement to be positively correlated with the completion of one’s degree. Among the findings from their study, the authors also found that it took students less time to finish their studies when they were more engaged. Finally, Steele and Fullager (2009) examined factors that can influence flow, as well as the impact of flow on several outcomes. “Flow” is defined in the positive psychology literature as “the experience of complete absorption in the present moment” (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2009, p. 195). Steele and Fullager (2009) found autonomy support from instructors, role clarity, and feedback to be positively associated with flow (as reported by participants). Flow further acted as a mediator of each aforementioned variable and psychological well-being. However, when all three variables were analyzed together, the authors found role clarity to function as an intervening variable of the relationship between feedback and flow. Positive correlations between flow and both psychological well-being and physical health were also observed in the study.

Focusing on the course level rather than on the institution as a whole has allowed Handelsman et al. (2005) to develop a precise definition of engagement and to

operationalize it in the Student Course Engagement Questionnaire (SCEQ). The authors started their inquiry by asking themselves how student engagement manifests itself in the classroom and whether the number of raised hands or questions asked is a valid indicator of engagement. The literature search performed by the authors led them to conclude that there are limited definitions and measurements of student engagement at the course level. They set out to develop their own questionnaire, using an inductive rather than theory-based approach, to capture “the many potential dimensions of student engagement” (2005, p. 185). They asked students and faculty to describe what engaged students “do,” “feel,” and “think” (2005, p. 186), and this inquiry resulted in a preliminary scale composed of “27 behaviors and attitudes” that was administered in class meetings. An exploratory factor analysis subsequently allowed the authors to propose a precise definition of student engagement at the course level, structured around four dimensions:

- *Skills engagement*: “Student engagement through practicing skills” (p. 186).
- *Emotional engagement*: Student engagement through “emotional involvement with the class material.” As noted by the authors, this form of engagement is virtually invisible (p. 186).
- *Participation/interaction engagement*: “Student engagement through participation in class and interactions with instructors and other students” (p. 187).
- *Performance engagement*: Student “engagement through levels of performance in class.” (p. 187).

The authors conducted a study that explored the effects of each of these types of engagement on student performance. In this study, student performance focused on the results related to three course components—namely, homework, a midterm examination, and a final examination. The findings revealed that each of the three course components was significantly impacted by at least one of the types of engagement. Notably, performance engagement influenced both homework and the midterm. The midterm was also impacted by skills and participation/interaction engagement. Finally, participation/interaction engagement was found to influence results on the final exam.

The four dimensions proposed by Handelsman et al. (2005) have allowed us to deepen our understanding of the notion of student engagement and go beyond the somewhat tautological definition found in the AACSB standards. We therefore selected this framework to better understand the engagement of our own business students and to explore the link between engagement and performance that the discussion of AOL assessment results

alluded to. The results of the empirical exploration that we conducted as a first step toward improving course delivery and content at our schools are presented next.

A concrete look at student engagement

To provide an empirical answer to the questions raised by the AOL results, we conducted a study in which we assessed student engagement in a large, multisection undergraduate business course. In this course, first-year students who are starting the AACSB-accredited business program¹ learn how to perform critical analyses of business texts and to recognize examples and counterexamples of fundamental business theories in reports of current business activities. The course entails a large amount of readings and provides opportunities for students to develop their writing skills. At the end of the course, it is expected that students are able to construct persuasive arguments using the language of business. The traditional course delivery includes one 3-hour meeting every week during 13 weeks. Instructors use class time to present the business theories that students are then asked to apply to current business news or business press articles. These application exercises are performed individually, in pairs, or in small groups, and are normally followed by a plenary discussion.

As mentioned earlier, we chose to focus on the dimensions of engagement identified within the Student Course Engagement Questionnaire (Handelsman et al., 2005). Drawing on the literature reviewed on student engagement, we argue that each of the four dimensions of student engagement (skills, emotional, participation/interaction, and performance) will be positively related to final performance within the first year introductory business course. We posit that high levels of each type of engagement will facilitate the development of critical skills in the course and encourage students to seek clarification of concepts when needed to improve their understanding of the material. These behaviors (as well as others captured within the SCEQ) will, in turn, be positively associated with their performance within the course.

Sample

Data were collected from a population of 1380 students taking one of 24 sections of an undergraduate business course during one academic term. Students were contacted by e-mail and invited to participate in an online survey that examined “perceptions and attitudes toward class and teaching methods.” Participation was completely voluntary. The survey was open for approximately 1 month, beginning a few weeks before the final class and closing just over a week following the end of classes. Respondents

were offered a gift card (valued at \$2.50) to a restaurant in exchange for their participation in the study.

In total, 142 students participated in the study (28.17% male, 71.83% female). It should be noted that female students constituted 38% of undergraduate enrollment for the academic year during which we conducted the study. Our sample is therefore not representative of the total population of students. This imbalance in voluntary participation is similar to that observed in other studies of student engagement. For example, Porter and Umbach (2006) found that females were significantly more likely to respond to the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) questionnaire. Kinzie et al. (2007) found only 36% males in their study of 472,985 randomly sampled respondents to the NSSE survey in 2005 and 2006. They also found that male undergraduate students engage less frequently in academically challenging activities than do their female colleagues. This could indicate that students who participated in our study were more likely to be academically engaged than the population as a whole.

The average age of participants was 21.25 years ($SD = 3.67$). Eight participants reported that they were currently employed full-time, working on average 34.5 hours per week ($SD = 11.80$), while 72 participants reported currently working part-time, averaging 15.41 hours of work per week² ($SD = 6.93$ ³). The vast majority of respondents were in business-related programs of study.

Measures

Demographics

We collected information about the age, gender, and program of study of participants. Additionally, we inquired whether participants were currently working, and, if so, whether they were employed full-time or part-time.

Student engagement

Participants were asked to evaluate each item of the Student Course Engagement Questionnaire (Handelsman et al., 2005)⁴ using a 5-point scale (where 1 = *not at all characteristic of me* and 5 = *very characteristic of me*). More specifically, eight items assessed skills engagement (sample item: “Staying up on the readings”),⁵ five items captured emotional engagement (sample item: “Finding ways to make the course interesting to me”), six items measured participation/interaction engagement (sample item: “Having fun in class,” where one item was slightly modified to fit the content of the present course) and three items assessed performance engagement (sample item: “Getting a good grade”). Handelsman et al. (2005) found each factor

to demonstrate acceptable reliability, with $\alpha = .82$ for both skills and emotional engagement, $\alpha = .79$ for participation/interaction engagement, and $\alpha = .76$ for performance engagement. All four subscales demonstrated acceptable reliability in the present study as well, ranging from $\alpha = .78$ (participation/interaction engagement) to $.87$ (emotional engagement).

Performance

Performance was assessed using the final grade (out of 100 marks) achieved in the course. Participants in the study were asked if we might obtain their final grades (“May we request your final grade in the course at the end of the semester?”) and were given the option of providing or denying permission to request this information. Though we received permission from 78 participants to request their final grade in the course, we were only able to obtain data for 76 respondents.

Results

The means, correlations, and reliabilities are presented in Table 6. The means for each type of engagement range from 3.41 (participation/interaction engagement, $SD = .73$) to 3.96 (performance engagement, $SD = .76$), suggesting that respondents were engaged in the course.

In consideration of missing data, several decision rules were applied, with the goal of ensuring that scores were only computed for participants who had provided answers at least half of the items from a given subscale. More specifically, means for skills engagement (an 8-item measure) were only calculated if data were missing for four or fewer items. Means for emotional engagement (a 5-item measure) were only computed in cases where data were missing for two items or fewer. Means for participation/interaction engagement (a 6-item measure) were calculated if data were missing for two or fewer items. Finally, means for performance engagement (a three-item measure) were

Table 6. Means and correlations.

Variable	α	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1. Skills eng	.81 ^a	3.78 ^d	.61	–				
2. Emot eng	.87 ^b	3.58 ^d	.81	.54** ^d	–			
3. Part eng	.78 ^c	3.41 ^e	.73	.60** ^d	.66** ^d	–		
4. Perf eng	.82 ^b	3.96 ^d	.76	.42** ^d	.43** ^d	.47** ^d	–	
5. Final grade	–	74.00 ^f	6.66	.31** ^f	.07 ^f	.19 ^{†f}	.34** ^f	–

Note. Skills eng = skills engagement, Emot eng = emotional engagement, Part eng = participation/interaction engagement, and Perf eng = performance engagement.

^a $N = 133$.

^b $N = 134$.

^c $N = 131$.

^d $N = 140$.

^e $N = 142$.

^f $N = 76$.

**Correlation is significant at the .01 level; *correlation is significant at the .05 level; †correlation is significant at the .10 level.

computed only in instances where, at most, one item was missing.

Applying these decision rules, which are consistent with the recommendations of missing data expert Graham (2009), two respondents were missing scores for skills engagement, two participants were missing scores for emotional engagement, and two respondents were missing scores for performance engagement.

The correlations were assessed between the four types of student engagement and performance⁶ in the course. We examine correlations due to the fact that participants in the study had information related to their performance on several components of the course, which contributed to their final grade, at the time that we collected data on engagement.

The results, presented in Table 6, reveal positive and significant correlations between skills engagement and performance ($r = .31, p < .01$), as well as between performance engagement and performance ($r = .34, p < .01$). A marginally significant positive correlation emerged for the relationship between participation/interaction engagement and performance ($r = .19, p = .10$). In contrast, the correlation between emotional engagement and performance in the course was nonsignificant ($r = .07, p = .57$).

Discussion

Engagement stands as a central concept within the 2013 AACSB Standards, described as one of “three vital areas” (along with impact and innovation) on which AACSB-accredited schools must demonstrate “evidence of continuous quality improvement” (AACSB International, 2016, p. 3). Research on engagement, summarized in the literature review, further suggests that student engagement is an important consideration within education. Clearly, efforts to assess and increase student engagement are of critical importance to AACSB, institutions, and educators alike.

The results of our content analysis of the AACSB 2013 Standards further underscore this point. Specifically, we found that the notion of engagement is both reinforced throughout the 2013 Standards and used in reference to a variety of actors and stakeholders within business schools. Notably, however, its definition within the 2013 Standards remains somewhat vague, which may make the process of demonstrating and improving engagement more challenging for business schools.

Despite this potential ambiguity, we believe that the lack of a concrete definition of engagement within the 2013 Standards provides business schools with an excellent opportunity to reflect on what engagement means within their institutions and to develop their own definitions of engagement, grounded in their

school missions. Moreover, as the 2013 Standards highlight the many actors that can influence engagement in institutions of higher education (see Table 3), these definitions should be developed at various levels, capturing the meaning of engagement at the course level, at the institution level, and related to the external environment of the school (among others).

Future versions of AACSB Standards may seek to clarify the meaning of engagement for the association in order to provide additional guidance to business schools as to the ways in which they may demonstrate and report engagement for AACSB accreditation, while continuing to provide schools with the latitude to develop their own definitions that best reflect engagement within their institutions and to promote the engagement activities that are in line with the school’s mission.

Empirical study

Our empirical study investigated four types of engagement (skills, emotional, participation/interaction, and performance engagement; Handelsman et al., 2005) among a sample of students enrolled in an undergraduate business course, as well as the correlation between each type of engagement and academic performance in the course. Though the sample size for the study was small and the data were collected during a short period of time, the results nonetheless provide us with a window into understanding the different ways into which students may be engaged. In so doing, we aimed to identify some “loop closure” opportunities for the school in which the data were collected, as well as to develop general recommendations that we hope might lead to improvements in student engagement—one of three pillars within the 2013 AACSB Standards.

The results from the study indicate that both skills engagement and performance engagement were positively associated with academic performance (assessed as per participants’ final grades in the course). Some of the items in the measure of skills engagement include “coming to class every day,” “taking good notes in class,” and “staying up on the readings,” while some of the items assessing performance engagement include “being confident that I can learn and do well in the class” and “doing well on the tests” (Handelsman et al., 2005, p. 187). A positive but marginally significant correlation between participation/interaction and academic performance also emerged in the study. Illustrative items from this scale include “raising my hand during class,” helping fellow students,” “having fun in class,” and “participating in small group discussions.”

These findings suggest that it may be beneficial for institutions and instructors to pay particular attention toward fostering each type of engagement in students.

As such, workshops that help students to develop skills related to each form of engagement could be offered to students, both via their institutions and, on a smaller scale, within courses themselves.

Interestingly, emotional engagement was unrelated to academic performance in our study. A visual examination of the means for each type of engagement within our sample suggests that the mean for emotional engagement ($M = 3.58$, $SD = .81$) is comparable to the means obtained for skills engagement ($M = 3.78$, $SD = .61$), participation/interaction engagement ($M = 3.41$, $SD = .73$), and performance engagement ($M = 3.96$, $SD = .76$). However, our finding is consistent with results from the Handelsman et al. (2005) study, in which emotional engagement was not found to significantly predict any of the performance outcomes investigated (i.e., homework grades, midterm grades, or final exam grades). Among the results obtained during the validation of their measure, the authors note that this form of engagement was “associated positively with general self-report ratings of engagement, a belief in an incremental theory of learning, and learning (rather than performance) goals” (p. 190). Thus, it is possible that emotional engagement has a more pronounced effect on other student-related outcomes.

Although emotional engagement was not related with academic performance in the present study, we believe that this type of engagement is an important consideration for students, instructors, and institutions. Notably, we did not find any reference to “emotional” engagement within our content analysis of the AACSB 2013 Standards. It may therefore be beneficial to place additional emphasis on this particular form of engagement to highlight its importance for both business schools and educators.

Strengths and limitations

The research presented within this article has several strengths. Notably, our content analysis of the AACSB 2013 Standards presents a detailed examination of the ways in which engagement is mentioned within the document, allowing us to generate several recommendations. Furthermore, our empirical study includes both self-reported data on engagement and an objective performance indicator (final grade in the course), reducing concerns that the results of the study may be influenced by same-source bias.

However, limitations of the empirical study must also be acknowledged. First, as only a subset of participants gave us permission to request their final grade in the course, the sample size for the performance data is notably lower than that of the full sample. Additionally, due to the fact that the data on student engagement

were collected toward the end of the semester (after participants had already received information about several components of their final grades in the course), we were unable to develop causal hypotheses pertaining to the effects of student engagement on course performance. In addition, the results could be skewed, given that the data were collected during a short period of time toward the end of term when students are potentially stressed and exert all necessary effort to succeed. We also acknowledge that our sample represents approximately 13.4% of the total population of students enrolled within the course in which data were collected, which may limit the generalizability of the results. Relatedly, it may be argued that agreeing to complete the survey could be considered as a sign of course engagement. It is therefore possible that engaged students were overrepresented within our research sample. In addition, the high proportion of female respondents in our sample strongly suggests a potential bias (given that the proportion of female students enrolled in the undergraduate business programs is much lower). This bias would need to be further explored. Despite these points, we argue that the study nonetheless provides an interesting window into understanding engagement at the course level in the school in which the data were collected and aids in our development of recommendations to foster student engagement in institutions of higher education.

Future research directions

The present study examined engagement at the course level only, driven by our interest in understanding ways in which students may be engaged in the classroom. However, research has explored the factors that can influence engagement, as well as its outcomes, at other levels as well, such as that of the institution (e.g., the NSSE). Moreover, the results of our content analysis of the AACSB 2013 Standards clearly show that the association places great emphasis on the engagement of many different actors and stakeholders within business schools, such as students, faculty, staff, professional staff, and the schools themselves (among others; see Table 3). As each may have a substantial impact on student performance and the achievement of learning objectives, future research may therefore assess the determinants and impact of engagement of all actors identified within the 2013 Standards.

Additionally, future research may be conducted to examine the effectiveness of different approaches, such as workshops or various modes of instruction within the classroom, to promote each of the four types of engagement.

Conclusion

The 2013 AACSB Standards emphasize three “pillars” upon which schools accredited by the association must regularly demonstrate quality improvement—namely, impact, innovation, and engagement. Focusing on the last of these, our article examined the concept of engagement through both a content analysis of the 2013 Standards and an empirical study exploring different types of course-level engagement within an undergraduate business course. In so doing, we aimed to contribute to the literature on AACSB-related issues and student engagement, to engage in loop closure activities related to the AOL assessment results that sparked our research topic, and to develop some general recommendations that may prove useful for both increasing student engagement and the achievement of AACSB-related learning objectives.

First, the results of our content analysis of the 2013 Standards underscore the focus placed on engagement within the AACSB documentation. While we found that the meaning of engagement is not explicitly stated within the 2013 Standards, the importance accorded to the concept is undeniable to the reader. Second, our empirical study examined the correlations between various types of student engagement and academic performance in an introductory business course. We found that several types of engagement (notably, skills, participation/interaction, and performance engagement) were positively and significantly correlated with performance in the class.

Clearly, it is therefore beneficial for instructors, institutions, and students themselves to cultivate these types of student engagement, as this, in turn, could favor the achievement of the learning goals of the programs offered by the schools. In sum, taking the time to define the concept of engagement, to objectively measure its level of achievement at course or institution-level, and to implement corrective actions when necessary can help business schools to successfully go through the AACSB 5-year continuous improvement review process.

Notes

1. In the province of Québec, students attend primary and secondary school for 11 years and a 2-year pre-university college program prior to entering 3-year university bachelor programs.
2. In cases where participants reported a range of hours worked full-time or part-time, a decision was made to use the average of the range provided.
3. Based on $n = 70$ observations.
4. The full instrument can be found in Handelsman et al. (2005).
5. The original measure includes nine items to assess skills engagement. However, we chose to omit the item “Doing

all the homework problems” as it was less applicable for the present course.

6. The median score and range for performance were 75.07 and 35.91, respectively.

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