Helicopter Parents Help Students, Survey Finds

Study abroad, research, and big projects are said to improve learning

By SARA LIPKA

Helicopter parents, notorious for hovering over their college-age children, may actually help students thrive, according to this year's National Survey of Student Engagement. Students whose parents intervene on their behalf — 38 percent of freshmen and 29 percent of seniors — are more active in and satisfied with college, says the monstrous annual report affectionately known as "Nessie."

Nessie has always emphasized what it calls "deep learning," and this year's report focuses on four activities it says promote that.

For freshmen, the report looks at learning communities, which take different forms but usually involve at least two courses focused on a theme. For seniors, it examines study abroad, research with a faculty member, and culminating experiences like a major project, "capstone" course, or internship.

Certain features of learning communities — required out-of-class activities, for example, and discussion groups that integrate material across courses — positively influence students' critical-thinking skills, self-understanding, and social lives, according to the survey results.

Keeping course enrollment exclusive to program participants, however, or having the majority of a student's courses be part of a learning community have more negative effects, the survey shows.

Study abroad also has significant advantages — especially for personal development and what the report calls "reflective learning" — regardless of the length of a program. But students who live with a host family or in a dormitory with classmates from their host country benefit more, the survey says.

In undergraduate research, students show more deep learning when their contributions to a project include reviewing related literature and interpreting findings, as opposed to collecting data.

Some culminating senior experiences are more valuable than others, the survey finds. Theses, which are the most common, improve students' writing and critical-thinking skills, but students who had field placements reported broader gains — in solving complex, real-world problems, for example, and working effectively with others. Required capstone courses, on the other hand, have little effect beyond helping students understand key concepts in their majors.

But many students, the survey finds, are not participating in these kinds of activities. Just 9 percent of African-American seniors who took the survey had studied abroad, while 15 percent of white seniors had done so. First-generation college students, those who had transferred, and adults older than 24 reported lower rates of participation across all four activities.
Male and female students participate in learning communities at about the same rate, the survey finds, but more women study abroad and more men conduct research with a faculty member or do a culminating senior project.

**Used by 1,200 Colleges**

The eight-year-old survey is a fixture in student affairs, and nearly 1,200 colleges have used it at least once. Last spring 313,000 freshmen and seniors at 610 four-year colleges in the United States and Canada completed the survey, which included new questions about heavily involved parents and the details of students' "high impact" learning experiences, like study abroad and research with a faculty member.

Participating colleges get detailed measures of their students' "engagement," or the extent to which they are immersed in academics and campus activities. The report evaluates institutions' performances in five categories: level of academic challenge, active and collaborative learning, student-faculty interaction, enriching educational experiences, and supportive campus environment.

In the past, few colleges have released their numbers, which show how well they help students learn. But this year, Nessie's National Advisory Board is pushing participants to publicize their data. More than 250 colleges will disclose their results this week in a new collaboration with *USA Today*, and the institute that runs the survey will release a national summary.

The survey is administered by the Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research and financed by participating colleges. This year's report, "Experiences That Matter: Enhancing Student Learning and Success," is available for $20 from the National Survey of Student Engagement.

http://chronicle.com
Section: Students
Volume 54, Issue 11, Page A1

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