Student Engagement in Campus Activities Programs: Does it Matter?

Purpose and Abstract

Research indicates that college students who have a higher sense of belonging and who are actively engaged are less likely to stop out (The State of Higher Education, 2023). Student engagement serves as a protective factor to students in persisting to graduation (Thomas, N.S., Barr, P.B., Hottell, D.L., et al, 2021; Tinto, V., 2002; Turnbull, 1986). At the University of North Carolina at Charlotte (UNC Charlotte), Student Affairs Research and Assessment – in collaboration with the Office of OneIT - has built an integrated system of historical and current student affairs data (i.e., “Data Lake”) to help us better understand the impact of student engagement on student success. These data represent student’s engagement in various campus activities where there is *intentionality* in student engagement and sense of belonging. In addition to the Data Lake, we have collected sense of belonging data from students at least once a semester through various measures over the past two years. This research allowed us the opportunity - through the utilization of integrated data sources - to examine how student engagement impacts student success and influences students’ sense of belonging. Additionally, this research provided the opportunity to identify student subpopulations that were lower engaged and to identify the challenges and barriers that currently exist that prevent them from being higher engaged. Through focus groups, we were able to develop actionable recommendations to promote an inclusive environment that encourages student engagement for all students.

Introduction

Research indicates that college students who have a higher sense of belonging and who are actively engaged are less likely to stop out (The State of Higher Education, 2023). Student engagement serves as a protective factor to students in persisting to graduation (Thomas, N.S., Barr, P.B., Hottell, D.L., et al, 2021; Tinto, V., 2002; Turnbull,

1986). This research was guided by Astin's Theory of Student Involvement (1984). It is important to articulate the core concepts of the theory in addition to the elements and assumptions to lay the framework for this research. Astin's Theory of Student Involvement explains how a student's engagement on campus has a holistic impact on their lives throughout and beyond their college career. According to Astin's Theory of Student Involvement, for maximum growth and learning to occur, the student must be actively engaged on their campus. The quality and quantity of a student's engagement on campus has a direct impact on the amount of learning and personal development that the student experiences. The core concepts of the theory are composed of three elements. The first includes a student's "inputs" such as their demographics, their background, and any previous experiences. The second is the student's "environment" which accounts for all of the experiences a student would have during college. The third is "outcomes" which include a student's characteristics, knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, and values that exist after a student has graduated college. In addition to the core concepts and elements, Astin also created five basic assumptions about involvement. First, involvement requires an investment of psychosocial and physical energy. Second, involvement is continuous and the amount of energy invested varies from student to student. Third, aspects of involvement may be qualitative and quantitative. Fourth, what a student gains from being involved is directly proportional to the extent to which they were involved in both aspects of quality and quantity. The fifth assumption is that academic performance is correlated with the student's student involvement (Astin, A.W., 1984).

Over the past two years, UNC Charlotte's Student Affairs Research and Assessment (SARA) – in collaboration with UNC Charlotte's Office of OneIT - has been building an integrated system of historical and current student affairs data (i.e., "Data Lake"). These data represent student's involvement on campus where there is *intentionality* in student engagement and sense of belonging. Specifically, these data represent *quality*

engagements. The Data Lake informs the *quantity* of these quality engagements. In addition to the Data Lake, we have been intentional in collecting sense of belonging data from students at least once a semester through various measures over the past two years. For this research, we utilized this data to better understand how student engagement influences students' *sense of belonging* and impacts *student success*.

Identification of Subjects and Methodology

This research employed a mixed methods research design in that both quantitative and qualitative data were used to explore the broad question: *How does student engagement in campus activities and programs impact student success and sense of belonging?* In addition to exploring this impact of student engagement, this research sought to identify strategies to better support students who are lower engaged so that they may also experience the benefits of student involvement in campus activities and programs. Using data from the Data Lake, institutional data, sense of belonging assessments, and focus groups we explored the following questions to better understand the impact that student engagement has on student success and sense of belonging:

Student Engagement

1. Which student subpopulations are higher engaged in campus activities programs? (Data Lake and institutional data)
2. Which student subpopulations are lower engaged in campus activities programs? (Data Lake and institutional data)
    a. What strategies should we consider to increase campus activities among lower engaged student subpopulations? (Focus groups)
    b. What are the barriers and challenges to participating in campus activities and programs? (Focus groups)

Sense of Belonging

3. Does participating in campus activities and programs influence students' sense of belonging to the institution? (Data Lake and Sense of Belonging measures)

Student Success

4. Does participating in campus activities and programs predict student retention? (Data Lake and institutional data)
5. Do students who participate in campus activities and programs experience higher retention compared to students who do not participate in campus activities, programs, and initiatives? (Data Lake and institutional data)
6. Do students who participate in campus activities and programs graduate at higher rates compared to students who do not participate in campus activities, programs, and initiatives? (Data Lake and institutional data)

These research questions were explored through the following specific aims:

1. Examine differences in student engagement in campus activities and programs (higher and lower) among students' demographic characteristics: race/ethnicity; sex; race/ethnicity and sex; first-generation status; age; and transfer student status.
2. Examine relationships between students' level of engagement in campus activities and programs and sense of belonging.
3. Examine relationships between students' level of engagement in campus activities and programs and retention.
4. Examine relationships between students' level of engagement in campus activities and programs and graduation rates.

Data

The data accessible in the Student Affairs Data Lake represents student engagement data from 2018 to 2023. The Data Lake is updated once a semester or as new data becomes available. For this research, participation in the following engagements were included in the possible total number of activities for students: (1) living on campus, (2) student affairs student employees, (3) Students Achieving First-Year Excellence (SAFE) program mentee or mentor, (4) Greek life active member, (5) Veteran Engagement and Student Transitions (VEST) program mentee or mentor, (6) Graduate and Professional Student Government (GPSG) member, (7) Student Government Association (SGA) member, (8) Campus Activities Board (CAB) member, (9) at least one visit to University Recreation (UREC) facilities, (10) Venture outdoor trips, (11) Venture Outdoor Leadership Training (VOLT) program leader, (12) sports club member, (13) sports club officer, (14) Emerging Leaders program member, (15) Students Engaging in Rewarding Volunteer Experiences (SERVE) program member, (16) UREC intramurals member, (17) Activate! Institute program participant, and (18) Divisional Student Leader Initiative participant.

In addition to the data from the Data Lake, sense of belonging data available to inform this research included the Student Affairs Sense of Belonging Survey (spring 2022), CONNECT Intake Survey (fall 2022 to 2023), 49er Student Experience Survey (spring 2023), and National Survey for Student Engagement [NSSE] (2020, 2022). Sense of belonging data included three questions in which students responded to a 6-point Likert item of strongly agree to strongly disagree for each question. All sense of belonging data were combined to one dataset and then combined with the master dataset containing student engagement data from the Data Lake. For analysis, the average of students' most recent responses to the three sense of belonging questions

were used. For all quantitative data, we used students' UNC Charlotte student ID number to connect to the multiple data sources.

Qualitative data were collected through focus groups. For focus group recruitment, the researchers collaborated with the Office of Institutional Research (IR) to pull a stratified random sample of 1,000 undergraduate students enrolled in spring 2024 from the following student subpopulations that were identified as being lower engaged from the quantitative analysis: first generation, Latine/a/o/x, non-traditional (age 25 years or older), and transfer students. Each sample was stratified by their appropriate subpopulations including race/ethnicity, sex, and class standing.

Methodology

Quantitative

A mixed methods research design was used and impact of student engagement was examined. Differences in student engagement by demographic characteristics were determined to evaluate differences in engagement among selected student subpopulations.

Analysis first included descriptive statistics to illustrate the relationships between the independent variables (demographic characteristics) and the dependent variable (number of student engagements). Next, inferential analysis was conducted to determine significance of the variation between subgroups and to examine the relationships between student engagement, student success, and sense of belonging. To examine differences between subgroups, a series of analysis of variance (ANOVA) tests were conducted to compare the effect of student demographics on student engagement. To examine the relationship between student engagement and retention, a series of binomial logistic regression models were employed.

Deriving student engagement levels for quantitative analysis

To derive levels of engagement, students who had no engagement at all in student activities were placed into the comparison group and then students who had any engagement in student activities were placed into groups by activity level using quartiles. A total of four quartiles were created for students involved in at least one campus activity while enrolled at UNC Charlotte. It was not possible to split the quartiles precisely at 25% due to the distribution of the data. These quartiles were determined by first examining the total number of engaged students (n=5,666) and dividing by four (5,666/4=1,416). Then, it was necessary to take into consideration the distribution of the total number of campus activities (0=minimum, 34=maximum) to ensure that ranges were represented within only one quartile. For example, students in the lowest engaged quartile had no more than 2 total campus activities while enrolled at UNC Charlotte and represented approximately 25% of engaged students. Students were grouped into the following categories:

- No engagement at all (comparison group): (n=1,593)
- Lowest engaged (1-2 total activities): 27.2% (n=1,540)
- Lower engaged (3-5 total activities): 28.4% (n=1,608)
- Higher engaged (6-10 total activities): 24.3% (n=1,379)
- Highest engaged (11+ total activities): 20.1% (n=1,139)

Qualitative

SARA recruited participants via email using the list generated by IR. Students were prompted to complete an intake questionnaire where they were asked to provide the following information: email, first and last name, student ID number (for incentive purposes), academic college, class standing, did they live on campus their first year, non-traditional student status, race/ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, first-generation student status, transfer student status, student veteran status, and

employment status. On the intake form, students were also asked to register for a focus group that worked with their schedule. Additionally, students provided their consent to be video recorded for the study. Then, calendar invitations were sent to students who registered for a focus group. Students who registered and participated in a focus group were eligible to receive a monetary incentive through an Amazon e-gift card. All focus groups took place on Zoom and a total of 117 students participated in 48 focus groups during spring 2024 with some focus groups only having one student. When there was only one student, the research team conducted a one-on-one interview rather than a focus group using the same protocol and semi-structured interview approach. Focus groups lasted anywhere between 30 and approximately 120 minutes. Once the focus group was finished, the video recording was uploaded to the researcher's Zoom account where Zoom was used to transcribe the interview. The video recording was automatically deleted from the researcher's Zoom account after 30 days.

An interview protocol was developed around the two research questions: *What strategies should we consider to increase campus activities among lower engaged student subpopulations?* and *What are the barriers and challenges to participating in campus activities and programs?* At the beginning of each focus group, the researcher reviewed the purpose of the focus group, established ground rules and expectations, reviewed the confidentiality statement, discussed the recording and transcription process, and reviewed the process for participants receiving their incentive for participation. Included in the protocol were two Zoom polls designed specifically to elicit conversation on strategies to increase awareness of events and programs on campus (see Appendix C). Focus groups were designed to be semi-structured so that the researcher could ask follow-up questions.

Coding procedures for qualitative analysis

Once transcripts were transcribed, researchers coded transcripts for themes in two cycles. In primary-cycle coding, the researchers used the constant comparative method to identify open codes. The secondary cycle consisted of axial coding to group open codes to form larger conceptual categories that lead to the creation of our themes (Charmaz, 2014; Saldaña, 2016). The researcher ensured the trustworthiness of the findings by journaling after each focus group. The memos served as a space for the researcher to record their initial thoughts and themes while also reviewing their notes taken during the focus group. While completing memos, the researcher was able to develop initial findings and themes that were continually refined and expanded throughout the focus group study.

Additionally, after each focus group, emerging themes were reviewed to determine if they were congruent with focus group memos and corresponding notes taken during focus groups. The process of recording memos, referring to previous memos while completing new ones, and reviewing notes taken during focus groups allowed the researcher to develop a thick description (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). A thick description is defined as a “highly descriptive, detailed presentation of the setting and in particular, the findings of a study” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 257). When used as a tool to address the transferability of a study, a thick description consists of a thorough description of the findings with supporting evidence in the form of participants' quotes, documents, and/or field notes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Furthermore, to develop a thick description, the research team reached the point of saturation where no new information was found to understand the phenomenon under study (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Results

Results support that student engagement in campus activities significantly impact student success and influence students’ sense of belonging. Specifically, the more a

student is engaged in campus activities, the higher the impact on retention, graduation, and sense of belonging. A more detailed summary of the results is provided below.

Student subpopulations and student engagement in campus activities

When data were disaggregated by student subpopulations, we were able to identify significant differences in student engagement in campus activities between groups. Specifically, Latine/a/o/x students (n=862, *M*=4.27) participate in a significantly lower total number of campus activities when compared to Black (n=1082, *M*=5.01) and White (n=4022, *M*=5.39) students, $F(4)=5.65$, $p<.001$. In addition, non-traditional students (ages 25 years or older) (n=906, *M*=0.96) participate in a significantly lower total number of campus activities when compared to traditional students (ages 18-24 years old) (n=6353, *M*=5.66) $F(1)=620.09$, $p<.001$. For first-generation student status, first-generation students (n=2098, *M*=4.41) participate in a significantly lower total number of campus activities when compared to students who are not first-generation (n=3525, *M*=6.48) $F(2)=275.05$, $p<.001$. Transfer students (n=2973, *M*=2.67) participate in significantly lower total number of campus activities when compared to non-transfer students (n=4286, *M*=6.74), $F(1)=1092.82$, $p<.001$ (see Appendices A and B for a detailed summary of results). It should be noted that there was no statistically significant difference in student engagement and sex (i.e., male and female).

Sense of belonging and student engagement in campus activities

Results indicated that a student's sense of belonging is influenced by their campus activity engagement level. Specifically, students who are not engaged at all (sense of belonging M=4.94, n=199) and students who are lowest (sense of belonging *M*=4.92, n=288) and lower engaged (sense of belonging *M*=5.02, n=449) experience a significantly lower sense of belonging compared to students who are higher (sense of belonging *M*=5.23, n=549) and highest engaged (sense of belonging *M*=5.41, n=615), $F(4)=16.17$, $p<.001$ (see Appendices A and B for a detailed summary of results).

Retention and student engagement in campus activities

We first examined the total number of campus activities that a student participated in while enrolled at UNC Charlotte and retention. Results indicated that students who are retained participate in a significantly higher number of campus activities (n=4676, *M*=6.44) when compared to students who were not retained (n=2583, *M*=2.61), *F*(1)=893.25, *p*<.001.

Next, we examined whether participation in campus activities predicted student retention while also controlling for other factors. Even after controlling for race/ethnicity, sex, transfer status, first generation, and age, engagement in campus activities significantly predicted retention, $X^2(14)=1112.63$, *p*<.001. Even more, *any* engagement in campus activities significantly predicted a higher probability for retention. Specifically, the odds of being retained for lowest engaged students (1-2 total activities) was 1.31 times greater compared to students not engaged at all. The odds of being retained were 2.07 times greater for students who were lower engaged (3-5 total activities) when compared to students not engaged at all. The odds of being retained were 6.16 times greater for students who were higher engaged (6-10 total activities) when compared to students not engaged at all. The odds of being retained were 19.06 times greater for students who were highest engaged (11+ total activities) when compared to students not engaged at all. In summary, as engagement levels increased, the odds of being retained significantly increased (see Appendices A and B for a detailed summary of results).

Graduation and student engagement in campus activities

Students who graduate within 4 years participate in significantly higher number of campus activities (n=3906, *M*=6.33) when compared to students who do not graduate within 4 years (n=3353, *M*=3.61), *F*(1)=459.93, *p*<.001 (see Appendices A and B for a detailed summary of results).

Focus groups

Focus group results are presented in the following two sections: (1) barriers to student engagement, and (2) strategies to increase student engagement on campus. Three main barriers were found that spanned all student subpopulations under study: finding students like them, juggling multiple responsibilities, and limited opportunities for community and involvement. Across all underrepresented student populations, students struggled to find other students who shared the same identity as them. Many students felt alone and described feeling like an outcast because they were not sure if there was anyone else like them. Furthermore, this also expanded to interests. For example, finding students in their major or student organizations that they could relate to on many levels proved difficult for many.

Due to the diverse nature of UNC Charlotte's undergraduate student population, students in multiple student groups shared additional identities under study. For example, many nontraditional students also identified as transfer students and many first-generation students identified as Latiné/a/o/x students. Because of this unique quality of our campus, students in every focus spoke about how they are juggling multiple priorities and responsibilities that are competing for their time and interests. These responsibilities are not limited to full- or part-time employment, but also to their commute to and from campus and family priorities. Finally, all students found that there were limited opportunities for involvement on campus. For some students this stemmed from the fact that it was hard to engage in identity-specific organizations because they were not accepted, an organization did not exist for an identity they shared, or they were not aware of specific resources available to them on campus.

To increase the awareness of campus activities and services, UNC Charlotte cannot depend on a one-size-fits-all approach. Students described themselves as having gaps in knowledge about campus programs and services from the start of their

UNC Charlotte journey. Additionally, facilitating connections among students with similar interests could enhance their willingness to participate in activities that they might otherwise avoid due to not having a companion to join them. Finally, as UNC Charlotte grows and attracts both traditional and nontraditional student populations, the university needs to commit to designing programs and services that meet all students' needs. Below are the following recommendations:

1. Improve the onboarding experience for underrepresented students by offering ongoing transition workshops throughout the first semester to ensure continuous support and integration. This onboarding experience could be coupled with informal or formal peer mentoring programs to add a social element so that students can build their support networks on campus. These workshops would need to be offered in several different formats (e.g. in-person and video recordings) to ensure that all students can access them on demand and whenever is conducive to their schedule.
2. Facilitate easier access to information through capitalizing on existing and streamlining digital platforms and social media. The Student Involvement office could partner with relevant offices on campus to develop a centralized social media strategy for each student population to promote student organizations and their events, ensuring consistent and widespread communication. Additionally, continue promoting and encouraging the campus to support the Niner Engage platform. Students desire a centralized place to find opportunities for involvement and it makes the most sense to capitalize on existing platforms already in place.
3. Build stronger peer networks. The university could create initiatives to help students form peer connections that are tailored to the interests and schedules of underrepresented students. Academics and career preparation are topics that these students care deeply about, so the university could invest in the development of a peer network program with the goals of supporting each

academically and as well connecting them with academic and career resources on campus.

Summary

These results demonstrate that for students who are engaged in campus activities – even at the lowest level of engagement, that they experience significantly higher retention and 4-year graduation when compared to students who have not been engaged at all in campus activities. Even more, engagement in campus activities influences sense of belonging for students.

This research study allowed us the opportunity, for the first time ever, to analyze data in this way – where we have been able to identify students engaged in campus activities at varying levels over time and compare them to students who have *never* been engaged in campus activities while enrolled at UNC Charlotte. These results support prior research emphasizing the value of student engagement on campus and Astin's theory of student involvement in that engagement in campus activities promotes significant benefit to student's overall experience and success. To promote the benefit of student engagement for all students, it is critical that we work collaboratively across the institution to address the barriers identified in this research and implement new strategies to better support lower engaged students.

Acknowledgement

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Appendix A:

Graphs for student engagement and demographic characteristics, sense of belonging, retention, and 4-year graduation

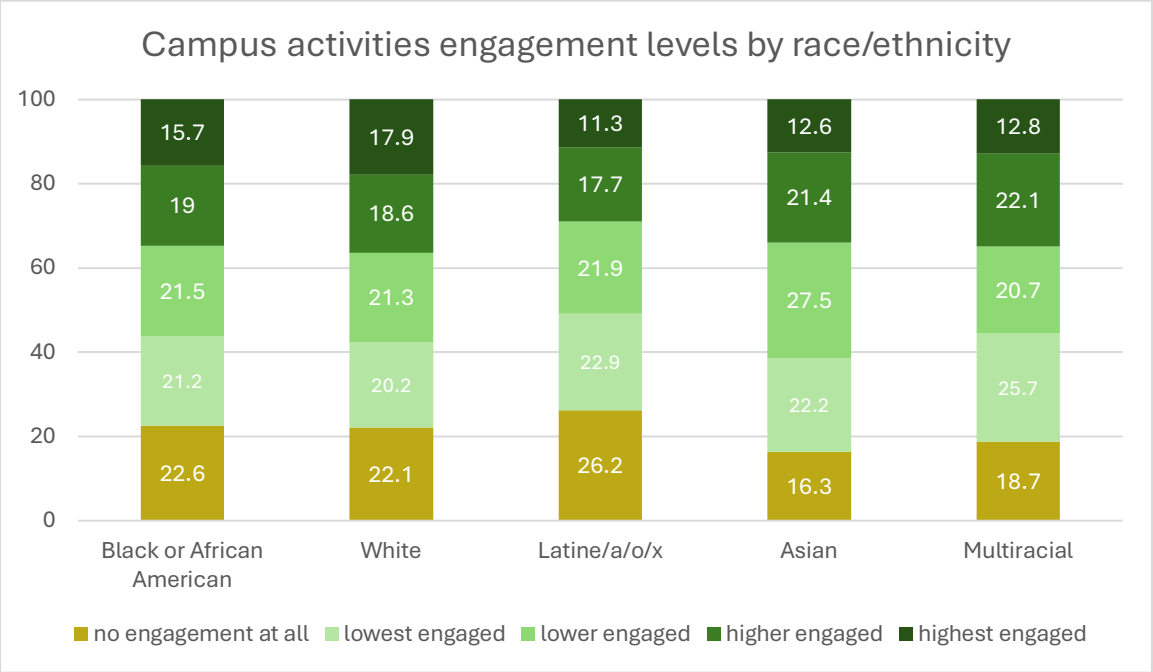

Figure 1. *Campus activities engagement levels by race/ethnicity*

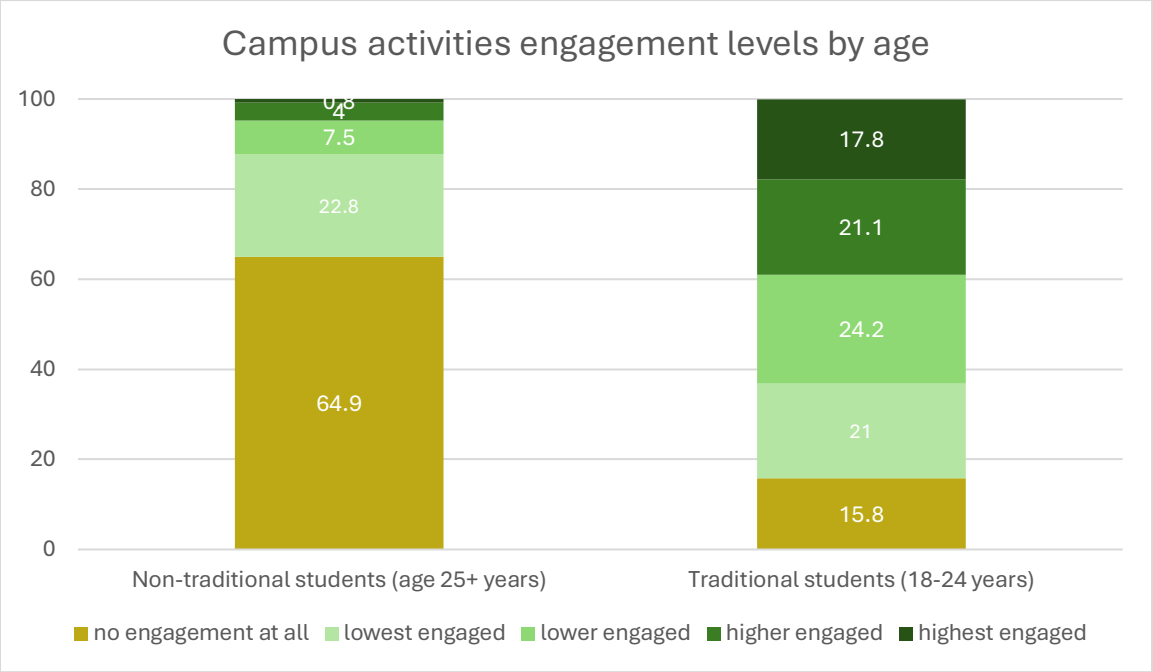

Figure 2. *Campus activities engagement levels by age*

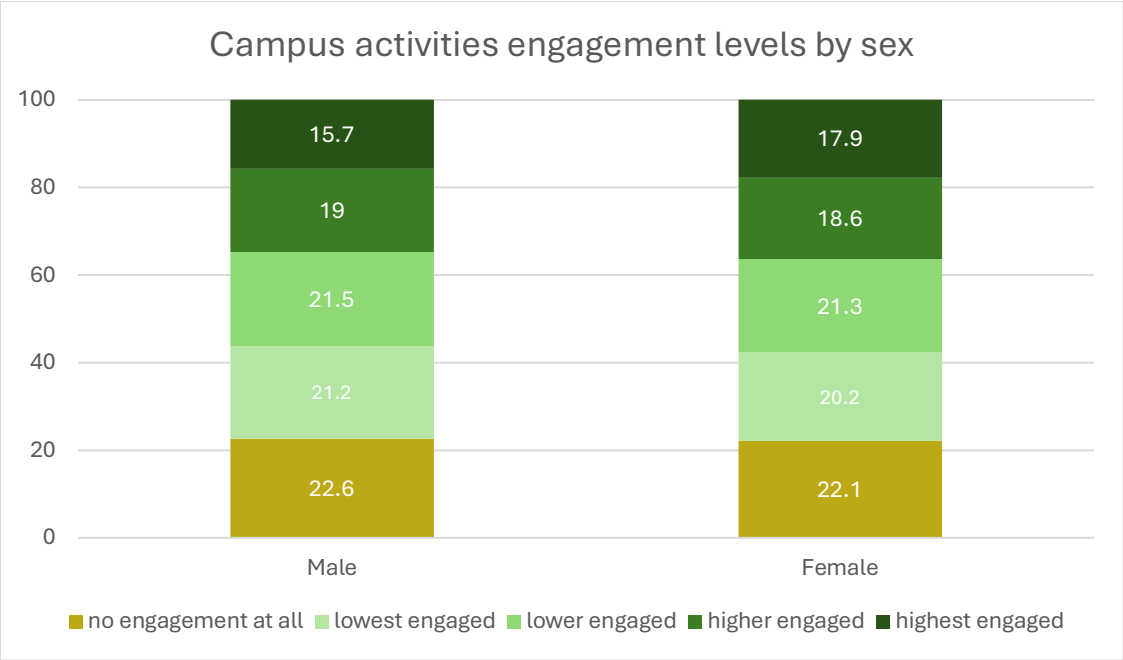

Figure 3. *Campus activities engagement levels by sex*

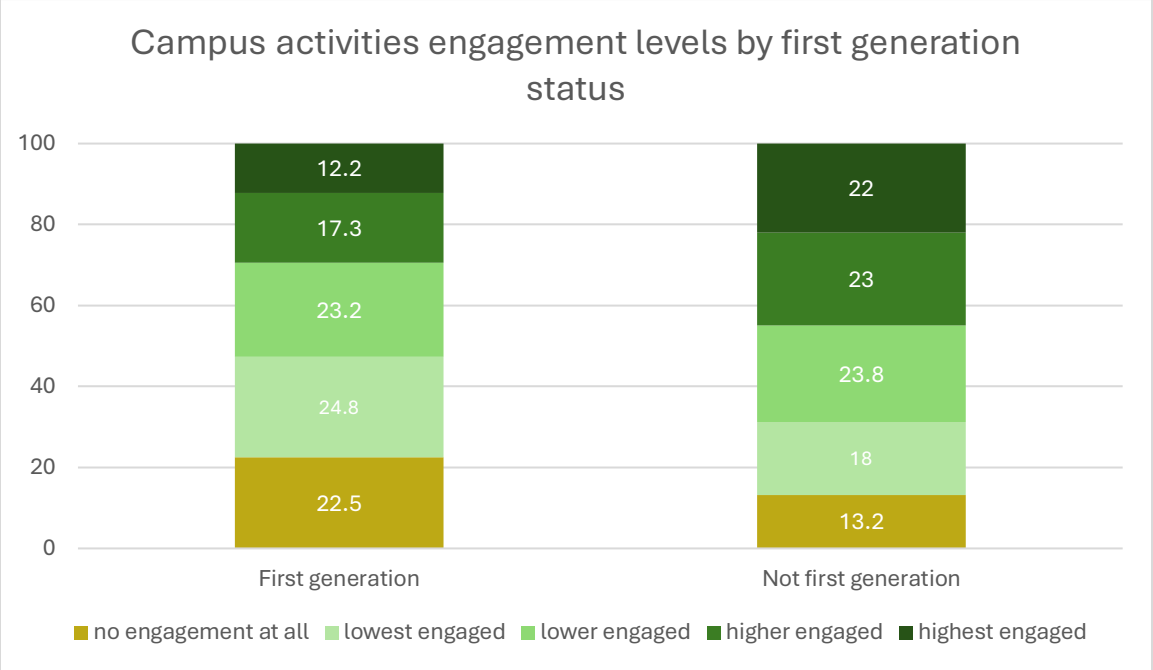

Figure 4. *Campus activities engagement levels by first generation status*

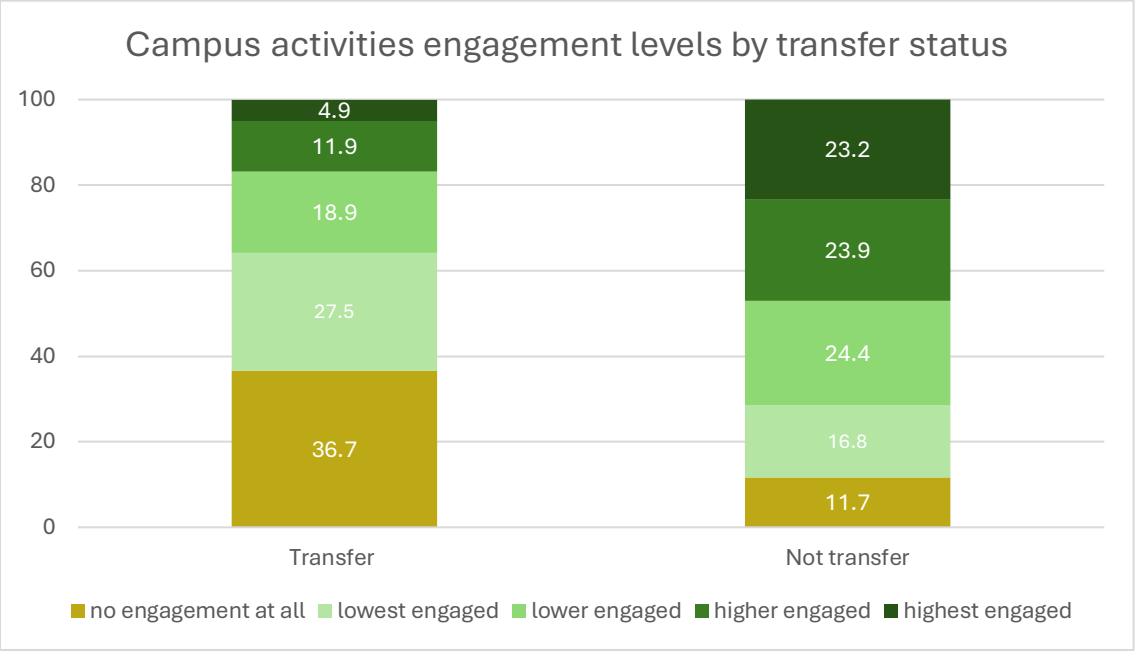

Figure 5. *Campus activities engagement levels by transfer student status*

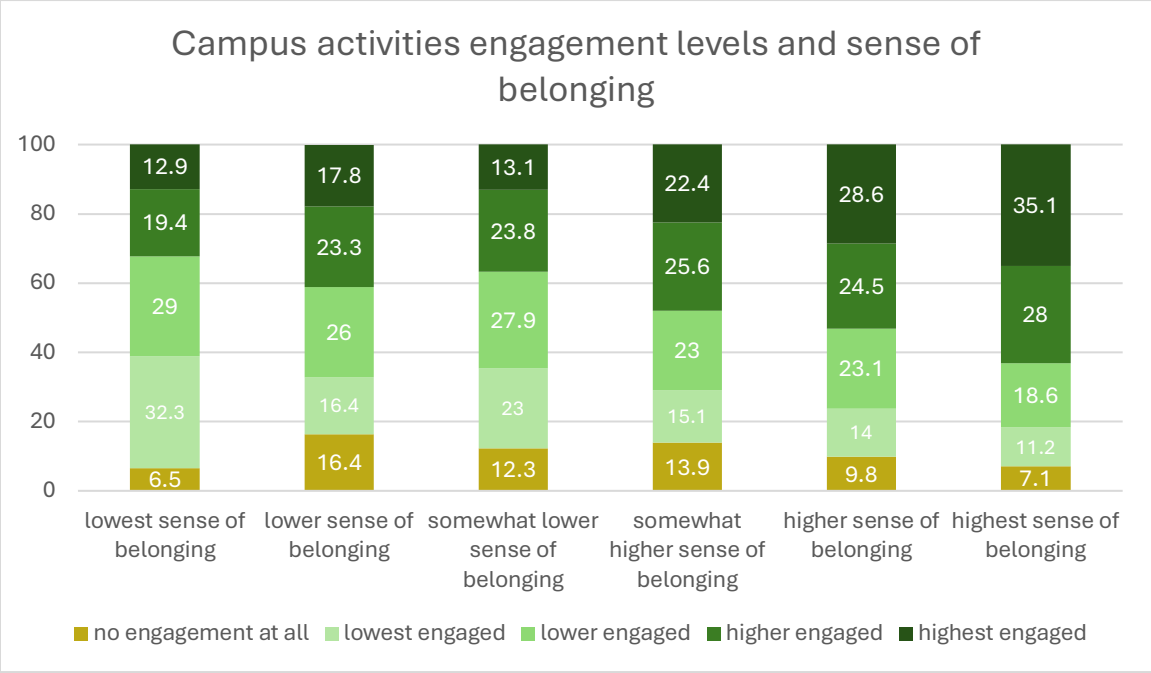

Figure 6. *Campus activities engagement levels and sense of belonging*

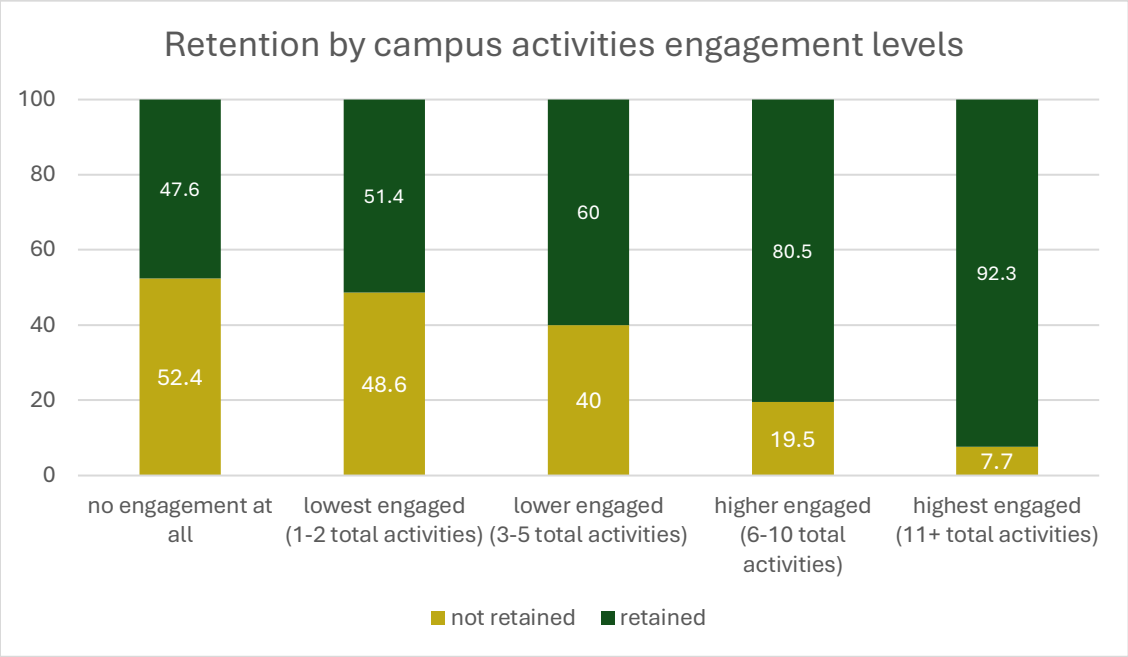

Figure 7. *Campus activities engagement levels and retention*

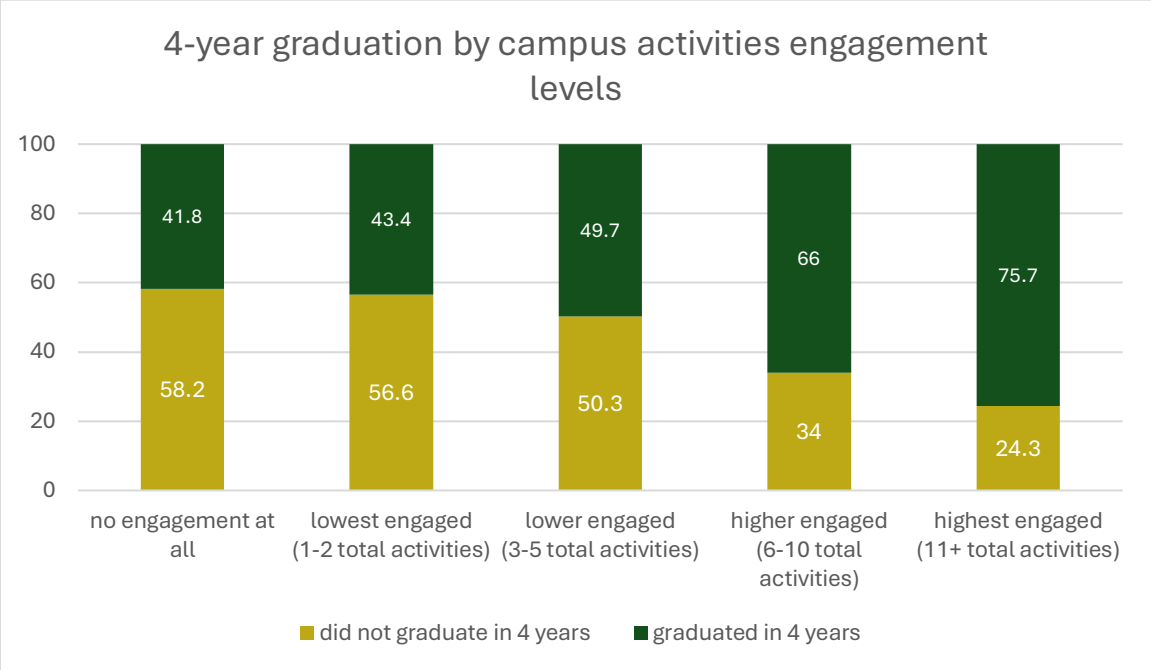

Figure 8. *Campus activities engagement levels and 4-year graduation*

Appendix B:

One-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) and Binomial Logistic Regression results

Table 1. Summary Results from One-Way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA): Comparison of total engagement in student activities (average) by student demographics, retention, and 4-year graduation

Independent variables (IVs)						*df*	*F*	*p*	Tukey's HSD
Dependent Variable: Total campus activities (average)	Race/ethnicity								
	Black or African American	White	Latine/a/o/x	Asian/Asian American	Multiracial/ Biracial				
	5.01 (SD=5.55)	5.39 (SD=5.87)	4.27 (SD=4.97)	4.91 (SD=4.79)	4.71 (SD=4.74)	4	5.65	<.001***	L<B,W
	First generation student status								
	First generation			Not first generation					
	4.41 (4.91)			6.48 (6.03)		1	275.05	<.001***	
	Transfer student status								
	Transfer student			Not transfer student					
	2.67 (3.58)			6.74 (6.02)		1	1092.82	<.001***	
	Traditional student status								
	Older (25+ years old)			Traditional (18-24 years old)					
	.96 (1.97)			5.66 (5.64)		1	620.09	<.001***	
	Retention								
	Retained			Not retained					
	6.44 (6.02)			2.61 (3.34)		1	893.25	<.001***	
	4-year graduation								
	Graduated			Not graduated					
	6.33 (6.00)			3.61 (4.53)		1	459.93	<.001***	

Note: *$p \leq .05$, **$p \leq .01$, ***$p \leq .001$

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA CHARLOTTE

Table 2. Summary Results from One-Way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA): Comparison of sense of belonging (average) by student activity engagement levels

Independent variables (IVs)						*df*	*F*	*p*	Tukey's HSD
Dependent Variable: Sense of Belonging (average)	Student Activity Engagement levels								
	No engagement at all (1)	Lowest engaged (2)	Lower engaged (3)	Higher engaged (4)	Highest engaged (5)				
	4.94 (SD=1.12)	4.92 (SD=1.26)	5.02 (SD=1.18)	5.23 (SD=1.07)	5.41 (SD=.91)	4	16.17	<.001***	1,2,3<4,5

Table 3. Summary Results from Binomial Logistic Regression Predicting Likelihood of Retention based on Student engagement

	B	SE	Wald	*df*	*p*		95% CI	
						Odds ratio	*LL*	*UL*
Lowest engaged	.270	.08	12.68	1	<.001***	1.31	1.13	1.52
Lower engaged	.729	.08	83.01	1	<.001***	2.07	1.77	2.43
Higher engaged	1.82	.10	368.78	1	<.001***	6.16	5.12	7.42
Highest engaged	2.95	.13	503.59	1	<.001***	19.06	14.73	24.65
Constant	-.579	.15	14.96	1	<.001***	.56		

Note: *$p \leq .05$, **$p \leq .01$, ***$p \leq .001$.

Appendix C: Focus Group Zoom Poll Responses

Table 4.

Sources of Information about Campus Events and Programs

Source	%
Friends	70% (82/117)
Student Leaders	46% (54/117)
Student Organization Advisors	24% (34/117)
Faculty Members	55% (64/117)
Counselors	9% (10/117)
Student Affairs Staff	20% (23/117)
Administrative Support Staff	9% (11/117)
Academic Advisors	31% (26/117)
Supervisors	3% (4/117)

Table 5.

Platforms/Activities that support Students becoming more Aware of Campus Events and Programs

Platform/Activities	%
Websites	42% (49/117)
Instagram	82% (96/117)
Paper signage	24% (28/117)
Facebook	12% (14/117)
Snapchat	14% (16/117)
Digital signage in campus buildings	49% (57/117)
Advertising on buses	24% (28/117)
Twitter	9% (11/117)
Niner Engage+ App	33% (39/117)
My Charlotte page	38% (44/117)
Reddit	8% (9/117)
Discord	17% (20/117)
Niner Insider	26% (31/117)
Department Newsletters	31% (36/117)
TikTok	21% (25/117)
Main campus screen when entering campus	30% (35/117)
Word of mouth	60% (70/117)
Text message	36% (42/117)
Niner Engage Events Calendar	26% (31/117)
Jumbo screens at athletic events	20% (23/117)
Threads	3% (3/117)
SGA	7% (8/117)
Campus Promo tables	26% (31/117)