ABSTRACT

This paper examines the relationship between student involvement in campus organizations and academic performance at a small college in southern Arkansas. Surveys were distributed to 380 undergraduate students across campus. Survey questions provide information on student demographics, interests, extra-curricular activities, housing and employment. The surveys were based on the College Student Experience Questionnaire (CSEQ) provided by the Indiana University at Bloomington and used to assess students’ access to and knowledge of institutional resources as well as the opportunities provided for learning and development. Academic performance is measured using students’ grade point averages at the end of the spring 2013 semester.

INTRODUCTION

Opportunities for learning exist both in the classroom and through student involvement on modern university campuses. As students’ decisions to join campus organizations change over time, so do the effects on educational outcomes. Many dynamic factors affect student involvement decisions including student employment, living off campus, and external family concerns (Newbold et al, 2011; Lundberg 2003). Lastly, some students may be lacking the initiative to get involved due to external alternatives and/or an apathetic outlook toward
university involvement. Many studies have examined the relationship between student involvement and academic performance. This paper observes the degree of involvement of students and how this level of involvement is related to the academic performance of students on a small college campus in southern Arkansas.

Student organizations are very diverse in their mission as well as the resulting responsibilities placed on participating students. Student organizations vary from athletic affiliations and academic organizations (both major and non-major related) to Pan-Hellenic, honor, and service organizations. Athletic affiliations cover sports team members, cheerleaders, and spirit organizations. Academic organizations include collegiate activities such as the marching band, nursing students association and the biology club. Interest activities are comprised of activities such as choral performances, intramural activities or membership in a religiously affiliated student group on campus such as the Association of Baptist Students.

It has become increasingly common for students to work twenty hours or more while enrolled full time (12 or more academic hours per semester). More than 44% of starting freshmen report plans to work while in college (Lundberg, 2004). Additionally, a growing portion of students are now commuting to school rather than living on campus. Two common reasons given for this observed trend include employment in one or more jobs as well as family responsibilities (Newbold et al, 2011). These students tend to schedule classes offered in the same time block such as Tuesday and Thursday afternoons. Although necessary for off-campus responsibilities, this situation creates a lack of on-campus interaction for the commuter student. It is this lack of on-campus interaction that reduces the participation in various student organizations (Newbold et al, 2011).
The purpose of this study is to estimate the level of involvement in student organizations and the possible impact this involvement may have on a student’s academic performance at a small college in southern Arkansas. We anticipate finding a positive and significant correlation between overall student participation in campus activities and that student’s cumulative grade point average. However, we expect to find differing results in regards to the type of organization a student participates in.

RELATED LITERATURE

The level of student involvement has been well chronicled in the research literature. For example, McCannon and Bennet (1996) surveyed a total of 813 students from two colleges in Georgia. They found that approximately 83% of students did not belong to a student organization that was affiliated with their major. The most common reasons reported on the survey for this lack of participation was the student had no time to participate in an organization due to job responsibilities or was not aware of any student organization related to their major field. Dugan and Komives (2010), however, find that 80% of students participate in at least one group experience before the end of their senior year. These conflicting statements shed light on the case that student involvement in campus activities is common in some cases but perhaps not in others. Many differing theories on student involvement have been examined.

Astin (1984) introduced Involvement Theory, in which he explained that students employed outside of campus are less likely to succeed in college due to the increased time demands. Several empirical studies support this finding by observing the hindrance of working hours on student involvement (Lundberg, 2004; Furr and Elling, 2000). Astin (1984) also observed that moderate amounts of work on campus (i.e. 15 hours or less) are positively
correlated with a student’s academic performance. Astin explained that the key to student success is involvement that leads to meaningful and educational interactions between students and faculty (Astin, 1984).

Several studies have shown that student involvement in campus organizations is positively correlated with skill development and personal growth (Lundberg, 2003; Rubin, 2000; Rainey, 1995; Patrick, Niles, Maegetiak, & Cunning, 1993). According to Patterson (2012), employers primarily value competence in communication, adaptability, problem-solving and teamwork skills. Several studies emphasize the empirical link between participating in student organizations and students’ development of leadership skills (Dugan, 2011; Thompson, 2006; Renn and Bilodeau, 2005). These desired skills are often introduced in an academic setting such as in the classroom while they are reinforced in extracurricular activities such as student organizations (Patterson, 2012).

Tinto’s (1993) study of oppositional culture emphasizes the importance of colleges in integrating students into campus life. He explains that this integration process reduces the likelihood that a student will drop out, therefore increasing the likelihood of succeeding in college. This theory stresses the importance of receiving support from college for academic success. One indicator of student support from a college is availability of student organizations.

Baker (2008) found that the type of organization in which a student is a member does influence academic performance. Specifically, membership in academic organizations was found to be positively correlated with academic performance whereas involvement in recreational organizations, including greek and intramural activities, was negatively correlated with academic performance. Participation in athletic and religious student organizations, on the other hand, was found to have no impact on students’ academic performance in their study.
**DATA COLLECTION**

We employed a survey instrument to gauge the degree of student involvement as well as the reasons for a student’s participation in one or more university organizations. The survey instrument used in this study is called the College Student Experience Survey. This survey instrument is based on the College Student Experience Questionnaire (CSEQ) provided by the Indiana University at Bloomington and used to assess students' access to and knowledge of institutional resources as well as the opportunities provided for learning and development. The CSEQ has been employed as a survey instruments in many papers including Kaufman and Creamer (2001), Helland et al. (2001), Cuyjet (1997) and Davis and Murrell (1993). In each of these studies, the CSEQ was used to correlate student demographics with levels of campus involvement. This paper measures several of the same correlations and relates the findings to academic performance. A sample of the administered survey is provided in an appendix at the end of the paper.

Out of the 380 surveys distributed throughout various undergraduate classes across the campus in the spring of 2013, we received 317 usable survey responses. Of these responses, 52.2% were from male students whereas 47.8% of responses came from female students. The sample of students is comprised of approximately 32% freshmen, 27% sophomore, 18% junior and 23% senior. In terms of age, 32.8% were 19 or younger, 54% were between 20-24 years, 5% of students were 25-30 and 8.2% of students were over 30. Over 78% of students reported that they are currently involved in one or more campus organizations. Grade point averages are
compared across various cohorts including age, gender, student classification and ethnicity.

Table 1 provides summary statistics from the collected surveys.

**METHODOLOGY**

The analysis in this study estimates a student production function where a measure of academic performance among college undergraduates is modeled as a function of students' characteristics. Academic performance is measured by the student's cumulative grade point average at the end of the spring 2013 semester. Specifically, this model projects the following relationship for individual students in the sample:

\[
\text{Academic Performance} = f(D, C, L, T)
\]

where \(D\) denotes demographic characteristics, \(C\) represents campus characteristics, and \(L\) and \(T\) denote the level of involvement and type of involvement, respectively. Equation [1] is provided below:

\[
[1] \quad AP_i = \alpha_0 + \alpha_1D_i + \alpha_2C_i + \alpha_3L_i + \alpha_4T_i + \varepsilon_i.
\]

Demographic characteristics include a student's gender, ethnicity, age and classification. We expect to observe a positive relationship for female students relative to male students as found in Duckworth and Seligman (2006). A positive relationship is expected for caucasian students and academic performance relative to students affiliated with a racial minority group as discussed in Ogbu (1987). Based on the findings of Eppler and Harju (1997), we anticipate a positive relationship for non-traditional students aged 30 or above. Lastly, students likely improve their ability to manage time between school work and socializing, thus juniors and seniors are expected to have relatively higher cumulative GPAs than freshmen and sophomores.
Students' campus characteristics include campus housing, as well as on-campus and off-campus employment. The Involvement Theory discussed in Astin (1984) suggests students who live and/or work on campus are more likely to be involved and will perform better academically relative to those who live and/or work away from campus. For this reason, we anticipate a positive relationship between academic performance and students living and/or working on campus and a negative relationship for off-campus students.

Each student's level of involvement is measured by the number of organizations he/she participates in. Assuming that involvement in additional organizations improves a student's development of critical skills (Patterson, 2012; Dugan and Komives, 2010; Thompson, 2006), that student would perform better academically than students who were less involved. We expect all levels of involvement to be positively correlated with academic performance with the relationship strengthening as the level of a student's involvement increases.

Lastly, we observe the type of organization(s) in which a student is involved. Student involvement is categorized by the type of campus organization that a student affiliates himself with. Academic organizations can be major related such as the Accounting and Finance Society or the Creative Writing Club. Academic organizations may also be non-major related such as the marching band. Over 23% of student responses reported affiliation with this type of organization. This type of organization provides a great deal of student-faculty interaction and experiential learning. Because students involved in this type of organization tend to have relatively high academic performance, we predict a positive correlation between student participation in academic organizations and academic performance levels.

The second category of student organizations includes Pan-Hellenic, or greek, memberships in fraternities and sororities. Examples of such groups include Phi Mu, Alpha
Sigma Alpha, and Alpha Phi Alpha. From our survey results, more than 17% of students report involvement in this type of organization. Many of these groups have support staff employed to oversee members’ conduct and to ensure all GPA requirements are met by participating students. This type of organization instills a certain degree of discipline upon students, motivating them to excel in their studies and reach the educational goals. Given the oversight provided to students in these groups, we predict to observe a positive correlation between involvement in Pan-Hellenic student organizations and academic performance levels.

Honors make up our third category for student organizations. Honors groups include honor societies such as Psi Chi or Beta Gamma Sigma, the honor societies for Psychology and Business students, respectively. Almost 9% of responses reported membership in this category. Many students that currently have membership in such organizations are often only qualified if their GPA is above some specified benchmark. Given this system of membership conditional on a student’s current grades, we expect to see a positive correlation between honor group membership and academic performance.

Our fourth category of student organizations includes Service groups on campus. These groups include organizations such as Enactus, formerly known as SIFE, and Phi Beta Lambda, also known as the Future Business Leaders of America. Approximately 15% of responses reported affiliation with this type of student organization. For some organizations in this category, the responsibilities for the students in terms of time and effort are much higher than in other categories. Additionally, many of these organizations do not provide oversight to student grades in terms of conditional membership. However, experiential interactions with faculty can potentially offset the time demands some organizations in this category place on student
members. For this reason, we anticipate finding an ambiguous effect between student involvement in service organizations and academic performance levels.

Interest/Talent groups comprise the fifth category of student organizations in this paper. These include performing groups such as Encore and the Genesis Choir, as well as intramural activities and membership in religiously affiliated organizations. Over 22% of responses showed membership in this category. Based on the findings of Baker (2008), we predict to observe a negative correlation between participation in intramural activities and academic performance.

Lastly, our sixth category of student organizations includes athletic affiliations. Athletic affiliations include students who are part of a college sports team such as football, basketball or softball. Supportive activities such as cheerleading and color guard are also included in this category. Almost 21% of responses reported student involvement in this category. Many college sports teams have required grade point averages for student athletes to participate in an upcoming game. Support staff is often employed to ensure students are giving necessary attention to their studies. This support structure helps students develop a sense of discipline that can positively impact their grade point averages. For this reason, we predict that athletic involvement will be positively correlated with academic performance. Table 2 provides a list of the variables employed in Equation [1] as well as the predicted coefficient signs.

**RESULTS**

Equation [1] was estimated using ordinary least squares (OLS). The results are presented in Table 3 at the end of the paper. Significant findings are reported below.

A few demographic characteristics were significantly correlated with a student's academic performance. The coefficient on gender is negative and significant at the 1% critical
value level. This estimate suggests that the average male student has a GPA that is 0.23 GPA points lower than the average female student in the sample. This result supports the findings of Duckworth and Seligman (2006). Likewise, the coefficient on Caucasian is positive and significant at the 1% critical value level. The estimated coefficient suggests that Caucasian students have GPAs exceeding minority students by an average of 0.438 regardless of campus involvement in this sample. This finding is consistent with Ogbu (1987).

Campus characteristics also play a small role in determining the relationship between campus involvement and academic performance. Students living on campus average a cumulative GPA that is 0.164 points higher than students that do not live on campus. The estimated coefficient is significant at the 5% critical value level. This result supports the findings of Astin (1984). Students' employment, either on or off-campus, is not significant in this case.

The level of involvement, measured by the number of organizations a student is involved with, was not significant at any level. This finding suggests it is the involvement that is related to academic performance, and not necessarily the level of involvement that matters. A student involved in one campus organization is not significantly different from a student involved in three campus organizations.

Lastly, the type of organization a student participates in plays a significant role in his/her academic performance. Students involved in honors organizations exhibit average GPAs that are 0.588 points higher than students who are not involved in this type of organization. The estimated coefficient is significant at the 1% critical value level. On the other hand, students participating in an Interest/Talent organization showed GPAs that were 0.165 points lower than students who do not participate in that type of campus organization. The estimated coefficient is
significant at the 10% level. These findings support the authors' predictions as discussed in the previous section.

**CONCLUDING REMARKS**

This analysis identifies several factors that influence a student's academic performance in college. Demographic characteristics such as gender and ethnicity explain a portion of the variance observed in college student grade point averages. Living on campus and engaging oneself in campus activities helps students to feel more involved in that group as well as the university as a whole. Astin (1984) referred to this relationship as *Involvement Theory*. Thus, students living on-campus exhibited higher cumulative grade point averages relative to students living off-campus.

Overall, student participation in campus organizations is positively correlated with academic performance. However, the type of organization that a student actively participates in can have varying influences on students' grade point averages. Students involved in Honors organizations tend to exhibit relatively high grade point averages whereas students involved in Interest/Talent organizations tend to underperform academically. This finding suggests that students should be encouraged to participate in campus activities and events, but to be selective in choosing their extra-curricular activities.

**STUDY LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

There are a few limitations to the data set collected and used in this paper. The data collected was mostly comprised of reported answers on a survey. Grade point averages were
located in the official school records, however, all other variables were taken from the usable surveys. There is the possibility that some answers were reported incorrectly, mostly due to student error.

The types of organizations listed on the survey are very similar in some cases, and a certain amount of overlap among the categories was observed. For example, Phi Beta Lambda is categorized as a Service organization based on the large amount of community service they provide to the surrounding region. However, Phi Beta Lambda also has an academic component since participating students compete academically in state and national competitions. Although 2 to 3 examples of organizations in each category are shown on the questionnaire, this overlap suggests some students may have chosen one category to describe their involvement when a different category would be a better description for the group. Perhaps a way to address this in the future would be to employ fewer categories that each includes more organizations.

Another limitation of the data is that it only provides a snapshot of the Spring 2013 semester. Longitudinal data spanning over several semesters would be optimal, but this would limit using freshmen since they would have at most one completed semester when taking the survey. The short time period also limits the ability to model any changes in behavior. The data set currently does not distinguish between a student who has recently moved from an on-campus residence hall to an off-campus apartment versus a student who never lived on campus. Additionally, the causal relationship is unclear in this analysis. We are not able to determine whether good students with relatively high levels of academic performance tend to join campus organizations or if campus organizations help students achieve relatively higher levels of academic performance. This study merely shows correlations between these variables, but does not attempt to show the direction of causality.
Lastly, a future contribution to this study would be to include alumni. Demographic and campus characteristics along with the level and type of involvement could be strongly correlated with measures of success after graduation in terms of job placement, level of employment and achieved salaries. This would demonstrate how campus involvement relates to professional success after school.

REFERENCES


Patterson, Bryan (Spring and Summer 2012). Influences of student organizational leadership experiences in college students leadership behaviors,” *e-Journal of Organizational Learning and Leadership*, 10(1), 1-12.


Appendix A: Survey Instrument

NAME: ____________________________ OR Student ID: _______________________

College Student Experience Survey

PART I: Demographic Information

1) _____ Age
   A. 19 or younger
   B. 20 – 24
   C. 25 – 30
   D. Over 30

2) _____ Gender
   A. Female
   B. Male

3) _____ Marital Status
   A. Not Married
   B. Married
   C. Divorced
   D. Separated
   E. Widowed

4) _____ Classification
   A. Freshman/First year
   B. Sophomore
   C. Junior
   D. Senior
   E. Graduate Student
   F. Unclassified

5) _____ Racial or Ethnic Identification
   A. American Indian or other Native American
   B. Asian or Pacific Islander
   C. Black or African American
   D. Caucasian
   E. Hispanic
   F. Other: __________________________

6) _____ Housing during school year
   A. Residence Hall or other on-campus housing
   B. Residence (house, apartment, etc.) within walking distance of University
   C. Residence (house, apartment, etc.) within 10 miles of University
   D. Residence (house, apartment, etc.) within 30 miles of University
   E. Residence (house, apartment, etc.) within 50 miles of University

PART II: Your Time
7) _____ Credit hours taking this semester
   A. 6 of fewer       C. 13 – 15
   B. 7 – 12           D. 16 or more

8) _____ Hours per week spent outside of class on activities related to your academic program, such as studying, writing, reading, lab work, research, etc.
   A. 5 or fewer hours per week       E. 21 – 25 hours per week
   B. 6 – 10 hours per week           F. 26 – 30 hours per week
   C. 11 – 15 hours per week          G. more than 30 hours per week
   D. 16 – 20 hours per week

9) _____ Hours per week (during school semester) you usually spend working an ON-campus job for pay
   A. None – I do not have an on-campus job       D. 21 – 30 hours
   B. 1 – 10 hours                                E. 31 – 40 hours
   C. 11 – 20 hours                              F. more than 40 hours

10) _____ Hours per week (during school semester) you usually spend working an OFF-campus job for pay
    A. None – I do not have an on-campus job       D. 21 – 30 hours
    B. 1 – 10 hours                                E. 31 – 40 hours
    C. 11 – 20 hours                              F. more than 40 hours

11) _____ Does your job affect your school work?
    A. I don’t have a job
    B. My job does not interfere with my school work
    C. My job takes some time away from my school work
    D. My job takes a lot of time away from my school work

---

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Co-Curricular Activities</th>
<th>Very Often</th>
<th>Often</th>
<th>Occasionally</th>
<th>Never</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>12) Attended a meeting of a campus club, organization or student government group</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13) Worked on a campus committee, student organization or project (publications, student government, special event, etc.)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14) Worked on an off-campus committee, organization, or project (civic group, church group, community event, etc.)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15) Met with a faculty member of staff advisor to discuss the activities of a group or organization</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>16) Managed or provided leadership for a club or organization – on or off-campus</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
17) _____ How would you categorize your co-curricular activities?
   A. Academic/Scholarship related (i.e. Biology Club, Band)
   B. Greek (Pan Hellenic, Pan-Hellenic)
   C. Honors (i.e. Beta Gamma Sigma, Alpha Chi)
   D. Service (i.e. Phi Beta Lambda, Enactus, Student Activities Board)
   E. Interest/Talent related (i.e. Encore, Genesis Choir)
   F. Sports related (i.e. Intramurals, Football, Baseball)

18) _____ Hours per week you usually spend working on your organization’s/team’s projects and activities
   A. None – I am not in/on any organizations/teams
   B. 1 – 10 hours
   C. 11 – 20 hours
   D. 21 – 30 hours
   E. 31 – 40 hours
   F. more than 40 hours

19) _____ How many different co-curricular activities/organizations are you currently involved in?
   A. 1
   B. 2
   C. 3
   D. 4
Table 1: Summary Statistics from Collected Surveys

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Min</th>
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<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<td>17-19 yrs</td>
<td>2.890</td>
<td>0.707</td>
<td>0.960</td>
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<td>20-24 yrs</td>
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<td>1.110</td>
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<td>25-30 yrs</td>
<td>2.744</td>
<td>0.608</td>
<td>1.980</td>
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<td>30+ yrs</td>
<td>2.987</td>
<td>0.762</td>
<td>1.090</td>
<td>4.00</td>
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<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>2.821</td>
<td>0.660</td>
<td>1.110</td>
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<td>Female</td>
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<td>0.960</td>
<td>4.00</td>
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<td>Freshman</td>
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<td>0.753</td>
<td>0.960</td>
<td>4.00</td>
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<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>2.999</td>
<td>0.635</td>
<td>1.500</td>
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<td>Junior</td>
<td>2.847</td>
<td>0.662</td>
<td>1.110</td>
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<td>Senior</td>
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<td>0.537</td>
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<td>Native American</td>
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<td>1.001</td>
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<td>4.00</td>
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<td>Asian/Pacific Island</td>
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<td>Other</td>
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<td>0.841</td>
<td>1.660</td>
<td>2.85</td>
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Table 2: Variable Specifications and Predicted Coefficient Signs

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<th>Variable</th>
<th>Specification</th>
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<td>Constant</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Demographic Characteristics:
- Gender [-]  1=male; 0=female
- Caucasian [+], 1=racial affiliation caucasian; 0=otherwise
- Non-traditional [+] , 1=reported age 30 or above; 0=otherwise
- Junior/Senior [+] , 1=junior/senior; 0=freshman/sophomore

Campus Characteristics:
- On-campus housing [+] , 1=student lives on campus; 0=otherwise
- On-campus employment [+] , 1=employed on campus; 0=otherwise
- Off-campus employment [-], 1=employed off campus; 0=otherwise

Level of Involvement:
- Org1 [+] , 1=1 organization; 0=otherwise
- Org2 [+] , 1=2 organizations; 0=otherwise
- Org3 [+] , 1=3 organizations; 0=otherwise
- Org4 [+] , 1=4 or more organizations; 0=otherwise

Type of Organization:
- Academic/Scholarship [+] , 1=Academic organization; 0=otherwise
- Greek [+] , 1=Greek organization; 0=otherwise
- Honors [+] , 1=Honors organization; 0=otherwise
- Service [-], 1=Service organization; 0=otherwise
- Interest/Talent [-], 1=Interest organization; 0=otherwise
- Athletics [+] , 1=Athletic organization; 0=otherwise
Table 3: Estimation Results of Student Involvement and Academic Performance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Estimated Coefficients</th>
<th>T-Statistics</th>
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<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
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<td>(19.403)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Demographic Characteristics:</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
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<td>(-3.423)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>0.438***</td>
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<td>Non-traditional</td>
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<td>Junior/Senior</td>
<td>0.0302</td>
<td>(0.410)</td>
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<td><strong>Campus Characteristics:</strong></td>
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<td>On-campus housing</td>
<td>0.164**</td>
<td>(1.972)</td>
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<td>On-campus employment</td>
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<td>(0.345)</td>
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<td>Off-campus employment</td>
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<td>(1.329)</td>
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<td>Org1</td>
<td>-0.008</td>
<td>(-0.074)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Org2</td>
<td>0.136</td>
<td>(0.992)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Org3</td>
<td>0.247</td>
<td>(1.395)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Org4</td>
<td>0.221</td>
<td>(1.029)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Type of Organization:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic/Scholarship</td>
<td>0.129</td>
<td>(1.404)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greek</td>
<td>-0.015</td>
<td>(-0.141)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honors</td>
<td>0.588***</td>
<td>(4.343)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service</td>
<td>0.123</td>
<td>(1.126)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interest/Talent</td>
<td>-0.165*</td>
<td>(-1.714)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athletics</td>
<td>-0.083</td>
<td>(-0.775)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F-Statistic</td>
<td>7.126</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Adjusted $R^2$ 0.248

Statistical significance at the 10%, 5%, and 1% critical value levels are denoted by *, **, and *** respectively.