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STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AND ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE IN THE COLOMBIAN UNIVERSITY CONTEXT

[*Compromiso estudiantil y desempeño académico en el contexto universitario colombiano*]

by/por

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Abstract

Despite the increase in Latin America of Higher Education coverage, grave dropout problems persist that question the role of educational experiences to foster students' academic engagement. This study was carried out in Colombia and sought to establish the relationship between the five benchmarks that compose academic engagement and the academic performance of a group of Colombian university students. The transversal and correlational study used the Spanish version of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) that measures students' level of participation in five dimensions: Academic challenge, active and collaborative learning, student-faculty interaction, enriching educational experiences, and supportive campus environment and its relationship to academic performance. The findings of 1906 students from 7 universities indicate that there are statistically significant, but weak correlations between the items that compose the benchmarks and students' academic performance, which lead to reflect upon key aspects to strengthen the education experiences offered to university students.

Keywords

Student dropout, retention, higher education, student engagement, academic performance, NSSE, academic challenge, active and collaborative learning, student-faculty interaction, enriching educational experiences, and supportive campus environment.

Resumen

A pesar de la ampliación de la cobertura en la educación superior latinoamericana, persisten graves problemas de deserción que llevan a cuestionar el papel de las experiencias educativas en el fomento del compromiso académico de los estudiantes. Esta investigación se realizó en Colombia y buscó determinar la relación que existe entre el compromiso estudiantil y el desempeño académico de un grupo de universitarios colombianos. El estudio transversal y correlacional empleó la versión en español de la encuesta *National Survey of Student Engagement* (NSSE) que mide el nivel de participación de los estudiantes en cinco dimensiones: reto académico, aprendizaje activo y colaborativo, interacción con docentes y personal administrativo, experiencias educativas enriquecedoras y apoyo institucional. Los hallazgos de 1906 estudiantes de 7 universidades señalan que existen correlaciones estadísticamente significativas, aunque débiles, entre los índices del compromiso estudiantil y el promedio académico, y conducen a reflexionar sobre aspectos claves para el fortalecimiento de las experiencias educativas que se ofrecen al universitario.

Descriptores

Deserción estudiantil, abandono escolar, retención, educación superior, compromiso estudiantil, desempeño académico, NSSE, reto académico, aprendizaje activo y colaborativo, interacción con docentes y personal administrativo, experiencias educativas enriquecedoras, apoyo institucional.

Postsecondary education in Latin America recorded a 40% growth in gross education coverage from 2000 to 2010 (Bellei, 2013), which represents a significant advance in the expansion of educational opportunities for Latin American youth. With the increase in state resources, support for the retention of students and higher personal and family expectations, countries such as Chile, Argentina and Brazil, among others, have managed to increase the possibility of student entry at the postsecondary level. Nevertheless, there are still marked differences observed between the wealthier population and those who have frequently been marginalized in the higher education system (Castillo & Cabezas, 2010). In Colombia, the increase in education coverage at the postsecondary level is also noticeable. According to the most recent report by the National System of Higher Education, 2013 (SINES in Spanish) the education coverage rate increased from 27% in 2004 to 42.4% in 2012. This picture, although encouraging, does not necessarily imply that the training processes are of the highest quality because there remain problems of retention, with a notorious failure and dropout rate close to 45% (Guzmán et al., 2009). It can then be inferred that the educational policies in Colombia, as in other countries in the region, have primarily focused on the increase in education coverage and ignored the quality of young people's educational experience. Poor educational quality has a direct impact on school dropout, with negative consequences for the country's development and participation in global processes, and even impacts students' personal and family environments.

To examine the phenomenon of university dropout in Latin America, countless studies have shown the association of school abandonment with factors such as lack of economic resources; incorrect choice of degree; shortcomings in academic skills related to critical reading, writing and application of mathematical-logical thinking; social adaptation barriers; detachment from the institution; student immaturity; reduced family involvement and lack of student engagement (Osorio, Bolancé & Castillo, 2012; García & Muñoz, 2011; Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 2011; Guzmán et al., 2009; Sánchez, Navarro & García, 2009; Rojas, 2008; Fajardo, Ibáñez & Saad, 2007; Pinto, Durán, Pérez, Reverón & Rodríguez, 2007; Castaño, Gallón, Gómez & Vásquez, 2006).

Of the above factors, student engagement has been the least explored in the Latin American context with the exception of some studies performed in Mexico (Monterrey Institute of Technology, 2011) and Puerto Rico (Baldaguez, 2010). This concept comes from theoretical and research approaches developed by Astin (1993), Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) and from the interactionist theory of Tinto (1993), which postulates that the decision of students to remain in or abandon their studies is influenced by their degree of academic and social integration. That integration, in turn, is conditioned by defined purposeful educational activities that are designed to increase the possibility that the students will learn and achieve significant cognitive advances. Therefore, students develop a high level of engagement with their academic endeavors if the institution offers enriching educational experiences with clear purposes that are intellectually, socially and affectively stimulating. Carini, Kuh and Klein (2006) note that this engagement helps lay the foundations for the development of essential skills and abilities for a productive and satisfactory life that extends beyond the university. To the extent that students are involved in these experiences, they will develop habits that enhance their ability to learn throughout life and their professional and personal success.

The study of student engagement has been operationalized in an instrument designed by Indiana University, the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). The NSSE has been applied in a systematic manner since 2000 in approximately 1,500 institutions of higher education in the United States and Canada and has provided key information for an assessment

of the educational experiences that are offered to students in these contexts. The validity and reliability of the survey has been shown in various studies (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2012a; Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie & Gonyea, 2008; Pike, 2006); these studies have also included a Spanish version that has been used so far in Mexico, Puerto Rico and Spain.

The NSSE measures the degree of student participation in activities promoted by the institution and that the literature has identified as essential to strengthening engagement and academic and social processes and generating a sense of membership in the university. These activities are grouped in five broad benchmarks and examine the level of academic challenge of the educational experiences offered; opportunities to interact with faculty, administrative staff and peers; spaces for active and collaborative work; diverse support that the institutions offer for students' academic and social integration and potential for enriching experiences—that is, of opportunities to enhance different areas of intellectual, cognitive and social growth (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2012b).

This article presents the results of a study whose general objective was to determine the relations among the five benchmarks of student engagement measured by the NSSE and the academic performance of a group of Colombian university students[1]. Specifically, the research proposed to:

1. Determine the relation between the academic challenge implicit in the activities offered by universities and students' performance.
2. Specify the relation between active and collaborative learning and academic performance in a group of Colombian university students.
3. Examine the relation between student-faculty interaction and students' academic performance.
4. Examine the relation that exists between the nature of the educational experiences and academic performance.
5. Establish the relation between students' academic performance and institutional support.

While the expansion of education coverage and enrollment has been evident in Colombia there is also a need to examine how educational institutions are seeking to strengthen student engagement with their academic endeavors and thereby raise graduation rates. The study collects information on possible connections among central aspects of students' academic and social success, highlights areas that demand attention and offers suggestions for implementing the proposed educational experiences in institutions of higher education.

Theoretical Framework

The present investigation is based on the ideas of Kuh et al. (2005) and Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) regarding student engagement. According these authors, the concept refers to the time and energy that students invest in the performance of educational activities in and outside the classroom. It is also associated with the policies and practices of an institution to encourage student participation in the programs and services offered. From this perspective, engagement is presumably strengthened to the extent that the institution designs and organizes learning opportunities that encourage students to invest more effort and dedication in the performance of cognitive tasks and in social participation. According to Braxton, Milem and Sullivan (2000), there is convincing evidence that students' social and academic integration into their university environment affects the engagement level that develops during their trajectory and their likelihood of graduating successfully.

Student engagement occurs when institutions work on the following five benchmarks: level of academic challenge, active and collaborative learning, interaction between students and

faculty, enriching educational experiences and supportive university environment (Kuh, 2001). These indicators are used in the NSSE and are based on the proposal by Chickering and Gamson (1987), who lay out seven principles of good practices in undergraduate education that involve contact between students and faculty, cooperation among students, active learning, immediate feedback, time dedicated to performing tasks, high expectations and respect for diverse talents and ways of learning. Below, the five benchmarks composing student engagement are described:

Academic Challenge

Proposed activities should be designed to cognitively stimulate the student to learn. The tasks that cognitively inspire students will presumably make them insist on fulfilling the expectations held by the faculty, spend more time preparing for each subject and develop more autonomous processes. As a factor associated with engagement, academic challenge has become an area of research leading to the development of different scales that intend to measure the level of motivation that academic activities generate in the student (Seifert, Pascarella, Goodman, Salisbury & Blaich, 2010).

Active and Collaborative Learning

Several authors agree that students learn more when they are intensely involved in their education (McCormick, 2011; Bonner, 2010). Students who are more active in the learning process will presumably have a greater possibility of academic success, that is, to the extent that pedagogical strategies are applied that involve the student performing analyses and putting knowledge into practice, significant learning will be generated. Likewise, the construction of knowledge is enhanced in interaction with peers. In this sense, dialogue, discussion of issues and assignments and active participation in collaborative projects facilitate the exchange of knowledge and favor mastery of subject content.

Student-Faculty Interaction

The concept of interaction with faculty and administrative staff refers to the process of the exchange of information, ideas, perspectives and views between the student and the faculty of the institution and is therefore considered an important factor in the cognitive and social development of the student (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Astin, 1993). The relevance of this concept is derived from numerous studies that have examined the effect of interaction on the experience of university students (Kuh & Hu, 2001). Other research suggests that the interaction between students and teachers does not affect all students similarly and that its impact depends on personal and contextual characteristics (Kim & Sax, 2009).

Enriching Educational Experiences

These experiences are opportunities in and outside the classroom that allow the students to learn about themselves and others through a collaborative process that involves classmates and teachers. The benefit that these experiences bring is represented in the significance of learning but primarily in the usefulness of learned content because what students know will turn into a fundamental part of what they will become as professionals (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2005). The acquisition of knowledge is important in the educational process; however, students must also develop their ability to apply this knowledge in different contexts. This idea has led to innovations in educational experiences that emphasize the development of competencies (Pozo & García, 2006) and that are less focused on the mere acquisition of knowledge. It is possible to find examples of this type of learning in community or volunteer work or in cooperative experiences in which students share with people from different economic and social levels or from different races. This type of experience provides opportunities to learn about other visions, ways of thinking and knowledge that is used differently in multiple contexts. It is assumed then that interacting with a broad spectrum of people, ideas, values, perspectives and challenging worldviews potentially impacts

students' personal and intellectual development during their university trajectory.

Institutional Support

This term refers to efforts by universities to contribute to students' social and academic integration. These actions involve a set of programs or projects that are directed at meeting the needs considered transversal in the students who are pursuing undergraduate studies (Guzmán et al., 2009). These programs are generally classified as academic, financial, psychological and administrative support.

Methodology

The study is part of a cross-correlational quantitative perspective. This research is transversal because it focused on a group of participants in a specific period, more specifically on students active in undergraduate class (as opposed to virtual) programs in seven Colombian universities with high-quality institutional accreditation enrolled in the second academic semester of 2012. High-quality accreditation is granted by the Ministry of Education of Colombia to institutions distinguished by their excellence, tradition, positive results, impact and social recognition. The study was conducted at institutions with high-quality accreditation because this accreditation is presumably granted to institutions with a track record in programs designed to address student dropout. It was therefore of interest to examine the practices of student engagement favored by these institutions that can be emulated as well as those that still require development. This study is correlational because the objective was to determine the degree of association between student engagement, measured by the items composing the five benchmarks of the NSSE, and the grade point average self-reported by each student.

Sample

A total of 21 public and private universities in Colombia with high-quality accreditation were requested to participate in the study, and seven of these agreed to participate voluntarily. A randomized sample of 3,999 students from 26 undergraduate academic programs was selected. The number of students selected considered an oversample of 5% to cover possible losses due to rejection or absence of students at the time of data collection.

Instrument

The information was collected through the Spanish version of the 2012 NSSE[2]. This instrument, validated at an international level (Carini et al., 2006), is composed of multiple-choice questions that examine the frequency of student participation in activities that represent good educational practices. It contains a total of 106 items, of which 42 correspond to the five benchmarks that integrate student engagement, 20 are related to sociodemographic aspects, two relate to satisfaction with the university experience, and 41 are additional items that explore the type and level of engagement.

The survey also includes an item in which student report their cumulative grade point average, and in the present study, this item was used as a measure of academic performance. Again, this concept is dynamic and multicausal and is specified with a value attributed to the achievement of the student. Often, to establish the level of academic performance, quantitative values reflecting achievement in academic tasks are employed for analysis of the passing or failing of courses, aspects that are closely related to academic success and dropout (Garbanzo 2007; Vélez & Roa, 2005; Pérez, Ramón & Sánchez, 2000). Cumulative grade point average, as a measure of achievement, is an accurate and accessible indicator of student performance.

Data gathered through focused interviews, cognitive tests and other types of analysis have shown high rates of validity and reliability for both the individual items and the entire NSSE (Kuh, 2009). The most recent reliability report (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2013) includes a Cronbach's alpha that oscillates between .77 and .89 for a sample of first-year students in the United States and a Cronbach's alpha between .78 and .90 for

seniors in the same country. All the tests related to construct validity, concurrent validity, predictive validity and the ability to discriminate between groups and reliability tests are collected in a psychometric portfolio (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2014). In Mexico, the Spanish version has been applied since 2009 with consistent results (Monterrey Institute of Technology, 2012), and in Spain, one study demonstrated that "the psychometric properties of the questionnaire are similar to those of the original questionnaire" (Vieira, Vidal & Barrio, 2007, p. 344). In the case of Colombia, the research team modified the language in the Spanish version of the instrument. These adjustments relied on the support of Indiana University. A pilot was then conducted with 86 undergraduate students at the University of La Sabana, who were interviewed to gauge their perceptions of the clarity of the questions and language used. On the basis of their responses, small adjustments were made to some expressions according to their use in our context. The survey includes a section for informed consent that guarantees protection of the students' identities and ensures the voluntary nature of their participation.

Procedure

The legal representatives of the 21 universities with high-quality institutional accreditation received a letter of invitation to participate in the study. Of the 21 universities, 10 responded positively to the invitation; however, more than three declined due to administrative or other reasons. In total, seven universities took part in the study, three private and four public. With each, a continuing process of virtual and telephone communication was carried out to coordinate times and locations for the use of the instrument. Members of the research team attended the sites prepared by each institution for the administration of the printed questionnaire. The data were collected in the second semester of 2012. Once the data were recorded, we proceeded to perform statistical analysis with the support of the SPSS package.

Results

The survey was answered voluntarily by 1,906 students, who corresponded to 47.7% of the total sample. Of this group, 54.4% were male and 45.6% female. Regarding nationality, 95.17% were Colombian and the remaining 4.83% were foreigners. For the most part, the students reported belonging to mestizo groups (76.3%), being white (19.3%) or, to a lesser extent, belonging to minority ethnic groups, such as Raizal (0.5%) and Rom (0.4%), which are ethnic Colombian communities. The average age of the students was 21.80 years with a standard deviation of 3.03. A total of 54.8% of students stated that they were in the first five semesters of their degrees, while the remaining 45.2% were in semesters six to 12 of their academic programs. Regarding the students' programs, 27.1% were studying Medicine, 13.1% Industrial Engineering, 7.7% Business Administration and 6.3% Mechanical Engineering. The remaining group belonged to other branches of Engineering, Administration and Humanities.

Analysis of Spearman's rank correlation coefficient was carried out between the cumulative grade point average and the scores of benchmarks evaluated for student engagement. The findings show that all the correlations were significant at the 0.01 level and are positive, i.e., high grade point averages tend to be accompanied by high scores in each of the benchmarks of student engagement. However, the values of the coefficients are very low, indicating that the strength of the association is weak (Table 1).

Tabla 1. Correlation between grade point average and the benchmarks of student engagement

		Academic challenge	Active and collaborative learning	Student-faculty interaction	Enriching educational experiences	Institutional support
Cumulative grade point average (R)	Spearman's rho	,183**	,138**	,145**	,126**	,092**
	Sig. (bilateral)	,000	,000	,000	,000	,000
	N	1880	1880	1880	1880	1874

**. The correlation is significant at level 0.01 (bilateral) *. The correlation is significant at level 0.05 (bilateral)

In the correlation results between each question of the benchmark 'academic challenge', which examines the experiences aimed at cognitively stimulating the student to motivate him/her to learn, and grade point average, significant but weak associations were observed for almost all the questions except 'number of written papers or reports of 20 pages or more' and 'number of written papers or reports between 5 and 19 pages' (Table 2).

Table 2. Correlation of each item of the benchmark 'Academic challenge' with grade point average

		Cumulative grade point average (R)
Academic challenge	Spearman's rho	,183**
	Sig. (bilateral)	,000
	N	1880
Number of assigned textbooks, books or packets of course readings	Spearman's rho	,187**
	Sig. (bilateral)	,000
	N	1877
Number of written papers or reports of 20 pages or more	Spearman's rho	-,011
	Sig. (bilateral)	,649
	N	1875
Number of written papers or reports between 5 and 19 pages	Spearman's rho	,001
	Sig. (bilateral)	,967
	N	1876
Number of written papers or reports fewer than 5 pages	Spearman's rho	,056*
	Sig. (bilateral)	,015
	N	1878
Emphasis on analyzing the basic elements of an idea, experience or theory	Spearman's rho	,174**
	Sig. (bilateral)	,000
	N	1879
Emphasis on synthesizing and organizing ideas	Spearman's rho	,163**
	Sig. (bilateral)	,000
	N	1878
Emphasis on making judgments about the value of information, arguments or methods	Spearman's rho	,120**
	Sig. (bilateral)	,000
	N	1878
Emphasis on applying theories or concepts to practical problems or in new situations	Spearman's rho	,110**
	Sig. (bilateral)	,000
	N	1879
Frequency with which you worked harder than you thought you could to meet an instructor's expectations	Spearman's rho	,071**
	Sig. (bilateral)	,002
	N	1878
Number of hours spent preparing for class	Spearman's rho	,204**
	Sig. (bilateral)	,000
	N	1875
Spending significant amounts of time studying and on academic work	Spearman's rho	,056*
	Sig. (bilateral)	,015
	N	1876

**. The correlation is significant at level 0.01 (bilateral) *. The correlation is significant at level 0.05 (bilateral)

Regarding the variables associated with 'active and collaborative learning', which examines the degree of active participation of students in their classes and work completed with their classmates, Table 3 shows that significant associations are not present between cumulative grade point average and 'frequency of work with other students on class projects' or 'frequency of meetings with classmates outside of class to prepare class assignments'. The other associations were statistically significant but weak.

Table 3. Correlation of each item of the benchmark 'Active and collaborative learning' with grade point average

		Cumulative grade point average (R)
Active and collaborative learning	Spearman's rho	,138**
	Sig. (bilateral)	,000
	N	1880
Frequency with which questions were asked in class or contributed to class discussions	Spearman's rho	,152**
	Sig. (bilateral)	,000
	N	1880
Frequency of class presentations	Spearman's rho	,066**
	Sig. (bilateral)	,004
	N	1880
Frequency of work with other students on class projects during class	Spearman's rho	-,006
	Sig. (bilateral)	,808
	N	1875
Frequency of meetings with classmates outside of class to prepare class assignments	Spearman's rho	-,002
	Sig. (bilateral)	,914
	N	1874
Frequency of tutoring support for other students (paid or volunteer)	Spearman's rho	,138**
	Sig. (bilateral)	,000
	N	1877
Frequency of participation in a community-based project (e.g service-learning) as part of a regular course	Spearman's rho	,067**
	Sig. (bilateral)	,004
	N	1877
Frequency of discussion of ideas from readings or classes with others outside of class	Spearman's rho	,110**
	Sig. (bilateral)	,000
	N	1877

**. The correlation is significant at level 0.01 (bilateral)
*. The correlation is significant at level 0.05 (bilateral)

'Student-faculty interaction' explores the frequency with which the students discuss assignments and grades with their professors, their dialogue about career plans with faculty members and their interaction with members of the academic community. The correlation coefficients between the questions regarding this benchmark and grade point average are significant but low (Table 4)..

Table 4. Correlation of each item of the benchmark: 'Student-faculty interaction' with grade point average

		Cumulative grade point average (R)
Student-faculty interaction	Spearman's rho	,145**
	Sig. (bilateral)	,000
	N	1880
Frequency with which grades or assignments were discussed with an instructor	Spearman's rho	,055*
	Sig. (bilateral)	,016
	N	1877
Frequency with which ideas on readings or classes were discussed with faculty members outside of class	Spearman's rho	,074**
	Sig. (bilateral)	,001
	N	1880
Frequency with which career plans were spoken about with a faculty member or advisor	Spearman's rho	,060**
	Sig. (bilateral)	,010
	N	1876
Frequency of receiving prompt feedback from faculty on academic performance	Spearman's rho	,092**
	Sig. (bilateral)	,000
	N	1878
Frequency of work with faculty members on activities other than coursework	Spearman's rho	,075**
	Sig. (bilateral)	,001
	N	1880
Frequency with which work on a research project with a faculty member was done (outside program requirement)	Spearman's rho	,128**
	Sig. (bilateral)	,000
	N	1875

**. The correlation is significant at level 0.01 (bilateral)
*. The correlation is significant at level 0.05 (bilateral)

Regarding the grouping 'enriching educational experiences' (which refers not only to the work performed inside the classroom but also to work impacting students engagement in their academic program and all efforts to enrich their experience), Table 5 shows that of 11 questions, only five correlations resulted that were statistically significant, and all were weak: 'involvement or intent to take part in activities related to community service or volunteer work before graduating', 'involvement or intent to take part in activities related to learning communities or with formal groups of more than two students', 'enrollment or intent to enroll in foreign language courses before graduating', 'frequency with which serious conversations are had with students who have different religious or political beliefs or personal values' and 'frequency in the use of electronic media to discuss or complete assignments'.

Table 5. Correlation of each item of the benchmark 'Enriching educational experiences' with grade point average

		Cumulative grade point average (R)
Enriching educational experiences	Spearman's rho	,126**
	Sig. (bilateral)	,000
	N	1880
Involvement or intent to take part in Practicum, internship, field experience, co-op experience or clinical assignment before graduating	Spearman's rho	,035
	Sig. (bilateral)	,129
	N	1878
Involvement or intent to take part in activities related to community service or volunteer work before graduating	Spearman's rho	,117**
	Sig. (bilateral)	,000
	N	1877
Involvement or intent to take part in activities related to learning communities or with formal groups of more than two students	Spearman's rho	,088**
	Sig. (bilateral)	,000
	N	1871
Enrollment or intent to enroll in foreign language courses before graduating	Spearman's rho	,088**
	Sig. (bilateral)	,000
	N	1874
Study abroad or intent to study abroad before graduating	Spearman's rho	,030
	Sig. (bilateral)	,196
	N	1875
Performance or intent to perform independent study or select an emphasis in an area of knowledge	Spearman's rho	,129
	Sig. (bilateral)	,217
	N	1873
Fulfillment or intent to fulfill requirements to complete the curriculum for the program of study (e.g., thesis, internship, certification programs)	Spearman's rho	-,002
	Sig. (bilateral)	,919
	N	1877
Frequency with which serious conversations were sustained with students who had different religious or political beliefs or personal values	Spearman's rho	,095**
	Sig. (bilateral)	,000
	N	1879
Frequency of having serious conversations with students of a different race or ethnicity than your own	Spearman's rho	,021
	Sig. (bilateral)	,357
	N	1875
Number of hours dedicated to participation in co-curricular activities	Spearman's rho	,036
	Sig. (bilateral)	,120
	N	1876
Frequency of use of electronic media to discuss or complete assignments	Spearman's rho	,072**
	Sig. (bilateral)	,002
	N	1879
Emphasis on contact between students of different economic, social, racial and ethnic origins	Spearman's rho	,009
	Sig. (bilateral)	,694
	N	1872

**. The correlation is significant at level 0.01 (bilateral).
*. The correlation is significant at level 0.05 (bilateral).

The last set of items is grouped under the heading 'institutional support' and examines the initiatives of the institution to strengthen students' academic performance, to support them in their social integration and to undertake other responsibilities. Similar to those observed in previous benchmarks, the correlations between the questions and grade point average are significant but weak except for the items 'emphasis on support to thrive socially' and 'emphasis on support to cope with non-academic responsibilities (Table 6).

Table 6. Correlation of each item of the benchmark 'Institutional support' and grade point average

		Cumulative grade point average (R)
Institutional support	Spearman's rho	,097**
	Sig. (bilateral)	,000
	N	1874
Emphasis on support to thrive socially	Spearman's rho	,000
	Sig. (bilateral)	,877
	N	1872
Emphasis on support to succeed academically	Spearman's rho	,058*
	Sig. (bilateral)	,012
	N	1874
Emphasis on support to cope with non-academic responsibilities	Spearman's rho	,008
	Sig. (bilateral)	,714
	N	1874
Quality of relationships with other students in the institution	Spearman's rho	,064**
	Sig. (bilateral)	,005
	N	1877
Quality of relationships with faculty members in the institution	Spearman's rho	,157**
	Sig. (bilateral)	,000
	N	1878
Quality of relationships with administrative staff and offices in the institution	Spearman's rho	,104**
	Sig. (bilateral)	,000
	N	1878

**. The correlation is significant at level 0.01 (bilateral).
*. The correlation is significant at level 0.05 (bilateral).

Conclusions and Discussion

The implementation of the NSSE for the first time in the Colombian context aimed to establish the relationship between the items that compose the five benchmarks of student engagement and university students' academic performance. The results indicate that there are statistically significant relations, although weak, for all the areas measured by the survey, closely resembling the findings of Carini et al. (2006) regarding student engagement and its relation to learning.

The correlation between grade point average and all the items that make up the benchmark 'academic challenge' was found to be significant but weak, except for the question asking about the number of papers of 20 or more pages written by the student. If one proceeds from the assumption that academic challenge involves creating experiences that stimulate the construction of knowledge to communicate it, then the institution must systematically promote training to improve students' writing competencies beyond the traditional elaboration of monographs or theses. Doing so would require an in-depth look at the type of writing practices that the Colombian university requires and professors' skills and ability to guide students. It would be paradoxical to expect high production of writing from students when the diffusion of academic production by professors is scarce.

This also has other far-reaching implications if the aspiration is for the country to significantly contribute to the field of scientific production. In fact, one of the major concerns of Colombian universities is the low level of growth in the number of scientific articles published in specialized journals worldwide (Salazar, Lucio, López & Aguado, 2013).

The correlations of items of the benchmark 'active and collaborative learning' were also statistically significant but weak. This result

emphasizes the importance of peer work, which generates opportunities for collective construction of knowledge, creates spaces for the resolution of questions and promotes debates that allow students to dispel concerns related to topics covered in class. It is crucial then to continue enhancing the role of students as a protagonists and agents of their educational process and to stimulate the creation of spaces that foster relationships of equality and spontaneity, as suggested by Garcia et al. (cited by Pineda & Pedraza, 2011). To strengthen this role, orientations are also required on the responsibilities that students should assume within their work team.

The relation between the items that make up the benchmark 'student-faculty interaction' and grade point average was also significant and with weak association. This finding seems to indicate that dialogue with faculty members may be linked to academic achievement. However, the quantity and quality of the dialogue are aspects that should be examined in depth. In this regard, several authors suggest that the probability of students' persistence and academic success depend to a great extent on faculty's efforts to teach with clarity and precision, on their interest in promoting an optimal classroom climate, in getting to know their students' backgrounds and on encouraging their participation in the educational processes. Furthermore, Lambert et al. (2012), Drake (2011) and Pineda (2010) note that when students are able to "connect" with their professors as people, that is, when there is a closer tie, they experience a sense of confidence that is a determinant factor to succeed in their academic program. This confidence is particularly important for those students who are uncertain about their place in the academic world. Informal relationships between members of the academic community are also important because they generate an environment that humanizes the educational institution. However, this assumption is difficult to address because from a methodological point of view, it is very complex to track informal conversations with professors and examine their impact on student performance (Cox, McIntosh, Terenzini, Reason & Lutovsky, 2010).

A central aspect of the previous benchmark is the participation of students in research projects led by faculty members. The association of such participation with student performance invites to reflect upon what teachers are doing to promote the spirit of research and to revise the policies and institutional strategies to achieve such purpose. Absent or low student participation in research limits the collective construction of knowledge and the strengthening of the scientific community in developing countries, as is the case in Colombia, and perpetuates the condition of students as consumers, instead of potential producers, of knowledge.

It is therefore imperative to enhance the academic dialogue between students and faculty, and doing so will only be possible to the extent that opportunities are expanded for students to be involved in their teachers' projects. A timely study demonstrated the impact of this type of practice in finding statistically significant, but weak, relations between participation in research with faculty members and student learning (Byerly et al., 2007). These findings are consistent with the literature worldwide on the role of the interaction in the development of skills for students' political and social activity; physical, emotional and academic wellbeing; aspirations and cognitive development (Kim & Sax, 2011; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Lau, 2003; Kuh & Hu, 2001; Astin, 1993).

As for the correlation between grade point average and the group of questions associated with 'enriching educational experiences', five results were statistically significant but weak. This finding reiterates the importance of providing learning opportunities for students that allow them to experience and assess diverse perspectives. The possibility of participating in internships, community work, study abroad and learning communities and deepening an area of knowledge, among other

experiences, allows the student contact with people of different social, economic, and cultural origins and with different ways of thinking, which results in self-recognition and knowledge of others. Low frequency of dialogue with students of different backgrounds would show a weak effort in terms of inclusion, which would undermine the purpose of building a more participative, equitable and just nation. Research by Harper (2009) and Kuh (2008) notes that educational practices such as those mentioned above encourage interaction with educational purposes among students and between students and their professors. Furthermore, when students participate in experiences such as internships and community service, they have more opportunities to receive feedback on their performance, resulting in improvements in their ability to synthesize and apply concepts. In this sense, we should more closely examine university opportunities to foster participation in programs and activities that provide more dynamism to students' educational experience and that could enrich them academically, socially and culturally. These findings also invite to reflect on universities proposals for academic mobility and curricular flexibility that are essential features for learning and crucial aspects for "professional training, mobilizing knowledge and the structuring of knowledge-sharing networks" (García, 2013, p. 59).

In this order of ideas, institutions should motivate student work on projects with diverse sectors of the society because this participation heightens students' sensitivity toward social diversity, and the contact with different agents nourishes their professional abilities (Pineda & Pedraza, 2011). Doing so in turn induces greater university engagement and involves the students in experiences that foster their sense of social responsibility. Likewise, when the university establishes alliances with the social and productive sectors, and involves students in community projects, it strengthens their sense of belonging and ownership of knowledge. If the projects are designed to stimulate thinking about reality and active participation in the formulation of solutions to specific problems, then students perceive that their work is recognized, which stimulates their sense of empowerment and leads them to consider themselves agents of change (Pineda, 2010; Zyngier, 2008; Fall, 2006). Encouraging student participation in institutional projects within the university is also desirable so that the students' work can be reflected within their own community. The latter is closely related to the approaches of Gargallo, Almerich, Suárez-Rodríguez and García-Félix (2012), who highlight an emphasis on the use of active pedagogies, less expository teaching and more centered on learning. Stimulating academic and social engagement inside and outside the classroom, then, is conditioned by the use of methodologies focused on the learner.

Another aspect that stands out is the connection between academic performance and the use of electronic media to discuss or complete assignments. This finding can be explained by the increased use of technologies, the Internet and the options that the Web 2.0 offers with its diverse social networks used for academic and non-academic objectives. The immersion of students in information and communications technology is a challenge for the professor who should be at the forefront of knowledge regarding their use. Updating professors on developments in this area will allow them not only to respond appropriately and effectively to the students' interests but also to generate more creative and innovative pedagogic spaces. However, the advance of teachers in this field requires the engagement of institutions as guarantors of technological resources and professional development.

In the benchmark 'institutional support', a similar pattern was found to those presented in the other four benchmarks—that is, statistically significant but weak correlations. These results indicate that institutions have an interest in supporting their students. The quality of relationships seems to be encouraged by members of the academic community, who create spaces that stimulate socialization among

the major stakeholders of the institution. Nevertheless, a concern arises regarding how these relations are fostered with members of diverse cultural, ethnic or social communities.

However, some limitations of this research cannot be dismissed. First, despite expectations, very few of the universities invited to participate in the study responded, reducing the sample size. Moreover, in some institutions, there were administrative issues with the dates planned for the survey implementation that also limited the number of participants. Furthermore, although the survey was answered in a timely manner and offers a first approach to the study of engagement, using qualitative methods that deepen the experience of the university student and other members of the student's community is essential. Finally, while it is true that universities seek to provide academic support to students, it is also true that student failure and dropout are frequently due to other causes; as a result, students at risk of failure or dropout require specialized care. This care is particularly important for populations with high vulnerability, that is, for those who have personal, family, social, cultural, economic, vocational or adaptability conditions that place them at risk (Kokkelenberg, Dillon, & Christy, 2008; Bailey & Alfonso, 2005). In this sense, the present study calls for the study of students' academic engagement in situations of vulnerability to target further supportive efforts.

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NOTES

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Abstract / Resumen	*Despite the increase in Latin America of Higher Education coverage, grave dropout problems persist that question the role of educational experiences to foster students' academic engagement. This study was carried out in Colombia and sought to establish the relationship between the five benchmarks that compose academic engagement and the academic performance of a group of Colombian university students. The transversal and correlational study used the Spanish version of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) that measures students' level of participation in five dimensions: Academic challenge, active and collaborative learning, student-faculty interaction, enriching educational experiences, and supportive campus environment and its relationship to academic performance. The findings of 1906 students from 7 universities indicate that there are statistically significant, but weak correlations between the items that compose the benchmarks and students' academic performance, which lead to reflect upon key aspects to strengthen the education experiences offered to university students.* A pesar de la ampliación de la cobertura en la educación superior latinoamericana, persisten graves problemas de deserción que llevan a cuestionar el papel de las experiencias educativas en el fomento del compromiso académico de los estudiantes. Esta investigación se realizó en Colombia y buscó determinar la relación que existe entre el compromiso estudiantil y el desempeño académico de un grupo de universitarios colombianos. El estudio transversal y correlacional empleó la versión en español de la encuesta *National Survey of Student Engagement* (NSSE) que mide el nivel de participación de los estudiantes en cinco dimensiones: reto académico, aprendizaje activo y colaborativo, interacción con docentes y personal administrativo, experiencias educativas enriquecedoras y apoyo institucional. Los hallazgos de 1906 estudiantes de 7 universidades señalan que existen correlaciones estadísticamente significativas, aunque débiles, entre los índices del compromiso estudiantil y el promedio académico, y conducen a reflexionar sobre aspectos claves para el fortalecimiento de las experiencias educativas que se ofrecen al universitario.
Keywords / Descriptores	*Student dropout, retention, higher education, student engagement, academic performance, NSSE, academic challenge, active and collaborative learning, student-faculty interaction, enriching educational experiences, and supportive campus environment.* Deserción estudiantil, abandono escolar, retención, educación superior, compromiso estudiantil, desempeño académico, NSSE, reto académico, aprendizaje activo y colaborativo, interacción con docentes y personal administrativo, experiencias educativas enriquecedoras, apoyo institucional.
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