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How Sense of Place Affects Student Engagement: A Correlational Study in Higher Education Environment

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ABSTRACT

The main aim of this study was to examine how the sense of place impacts the engagement levels of university students. The research employed a correlational design and survey methodology. A sample of 600 university students from three institutions in Meiktila Township, Myanmar, was chosen using a simple random sampling technique. The Sense of Place Revised Scale and Student Engagement Revised Scale were utilized to gauge students' sense of place and engagement. The findings revealed that the sample mean (31.51) exceeded the theoretical mean (27.5) concerning the sense of place, indicating that university students have a robust sense of place in their academic environment. Additionally, all dimensions of the sense of place exhibited a positive correlation with student engagement ($r = .532$, $p < .01$). Multiple regression analysis highlighted the sense of place as the most influential predictor of student engagement. The Adjusted R^2 result indicated that 28% of student engagement can be elucidated by the sense of place. Consequently, this study underscores the importance of cultivating a satisfactory sense of place for enhancing overall student engagement.

INTRODUCTION

The 21st century has ushered in significant societal, educational, economic, and cultural transformations. Education plays a crucial role in elevating living standards and equipping individuals to tackle challenges. Student education primarily aims to foster learning and personal development, with student engagement identified as a pivotal factor influencing the quality of effort students invest in purposeful educational activities (Astin, 1993; Friaes, 2021; Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991). The physical campus environment serves as the stage where student engagement unfolds. Given the literature suggesting its impact on shaping the college experience, investigating students' attitudes toward their campus's physical environment becomes imperative.

Research by Scannell and Gifford (2010) indicated that a stronger sense of place correlates with increased engagement in place-protective behavior, potentially leading to goal support and self-regulation. A favorite place, as an embodiment of a strong sense of place, offers a secure and

comfortable setting conducive to self-reflection, problem-solving, and stress relief. This safe haven becomes integral for planning and evaluating progress toward personal goals. A robust sense of place emerges as a precursor to student success in college, akin to student engagement. Additionally, a sense of place correlates with students' commitment, persistence, and loyalty to their institution (Kinzie & Kuh, 2007) and is an anticipated outcome of campus design.

Contemporary students are deeply engaged in activities that resonate with their creativity, competitiveness, and social needs, demanding schools tap into their intrinsic desire for knowledge and competence (Smith, 2020). Consequently, examining the evolving learning environment, particularly the intersection of student engagement and sense of place, becomes crucial to ensure that today's physical campus environment supports students' learning agendas both presently and in the future.

Given the established importance of student engagement as a predictor of success in university

settings, this study underscores the significance of students' sense of place in predicting outcomes, considering its significant association with student engagement. The focus is on understanding and enhancing university students' sense of place and their engagement within the university context.

Sense of place typically refers to an emotional bonding to a particular geographic place (Bott et al., 2006). This study adopts the tripartite conceptual organizing framework (person-process-place) introduced by Scannell and Gifford (2010). Within this three-dimensional framework, the person dimension delves into the individual or collective derivation of place meanings, emphasizing the actor and the extent of attachment. The process dimension examines the psychological processes facilitating place attachment, encompassing affective, cognitive, and behavioral aspects. The place dimension highlights the characteristics of attachment, including spatial considerations, specificity, and the significance of social or physical elements (Scannell & Gifford, 2010). Student engagement deals with students being involved or engaged with their education to enhance learning (Hornby & Turnbull, 2010).

Theoretical Framework for Student Engagement. Student engagement refers to the degree of involvement, interest, and enthusiasm that students demonstrate in their learning experiences, both inside and outside the classroom, leading to better academic performance, higher motivation, and overall positive educational outcomes (Fredricks et al., 2004). This study aligns with the involvement theory pioneered by Astin (1999), grounded in five fundamental assumptions: (1) Involvement necessitates the investment of both physical and psychological energy in diverse student experiences or specific activities; (2) Involvement exists along a continuum, allowing for variations in degrees of involvement among different students for different experiences, or even within the same student across different times; (3) Involvement exhibits both qualitative and quantitative aspects. This implies that one can gauge the duration (quantity of time) a student spends on an activity, such as reading a mathematics textbook, as well as the depth of engagement (quality of effort or involvement) demonstrated through actions like note-taking, cross-referencing, and problem-solving; (4) The

extent of student learning and development is directly proportional to the quality and quantity of student involvement; (5) The effectiveness of any educational policy or practice is closely tied to its capacity to enhance student involvement.

Aims of the Study. The main aim of this study is to investigate the effect of a sense of place on student engagement of university students in Meiktila Township. The specific objectives are as follows: (1) To examine the state of sense of place and student engagement of university students; (2) To explore the relationship between sense of place and student engagement; (3) To assess the extent to which the impact of sense of place on student engagement of university students; (4) To identify and analyze the specific sense of place factors that serve as optimal predictors for various dimensions of student engagement.

METHODS

Research Method. Correlational research design and survey method were taken. **Sampling.** The participants of this study were first-year and second-year students attending (2019-2020) Academic Years from two universities and one college in Meiktila Township, Myanmar. The number of participants was 600 students (male=300, female=300). The sample was chosen by using a simple random sampling technique.

Research Instrument. Two instruments were used to collect the data. The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE, 2012) developed five engagement indicators to assess student engagement in higher education. The NSSE instrument originally consisted of 107 items. The instrument was modified by Okoli (2013) to reflect a sense of place items. Therefore, the two main instruments of this study are the Sense of Place Revised Scale and the Student Engagement Revised Scale modified by Okoli (2013). There are three main subscales in the Sense of Place Revised Scale: place attachment (PA), place identity (PI), place dependence (PD), and a total of 11 items. The internal consistency of this scale is $\alpha = .758$.

Again, in the Student Engagement Revised Scale, there are five subscales: academic challenges, learning with peers, experience with faculty, campus environment, high-impact practices, and a total of 53 items. The internal consistency of this scale is $\alpha = .912$.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Descriptive Statistics of Students' Sense of Place

As shown in Table 1, the sample mean (31.51) is greater than the theoretical mean (27.5) in the

sense of place. It can be assumed that university students have a good sense of place in their university.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics Results of Students' Sense of Place

| | Mean | Mean Percentage | Std. Deviation |
|------------------------|-------|-----------------|----------------|
| Place Attachment | 12.03 | 75.19% | 1.88 |
| Place Identity | 11.22 | 93.5% | 1.55 |
| Place Dependence | 8.26 | 51.63% | 1.78 |
| Overall Sense of Place | 31.51 | 71.61% | 3.71 |

According to the above result, the mean percentage of the place identity subscale was the highest (93.5%) among the three subscales of sense of place. And the student had the lowest mean percentage in the place dependence subscale (51.63%). Therefore, it can be interpreted that students feel that their university campuses reflect the types of persons they are. However, students

feel that the campuses cannot provide many of the opportunities to engage in their favorite activities.

The Relationship Between Sense of Place and Student Engagement

To investigate the relationship between sense of place (SP) and student engagement (SE), the Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was calculated (see Table 2).

Table 2. Intercorrelations Result Between Sense of Place and Student Engagement

| | Academic Challenges | Learning with Peers | Experience with Faculty | Campus Environment | High Impact Practices | Overall SE |
|----|---------------------|---------------------|-------------------------|--------------------|-----------------------|------------|
| PA | .299** | .287** | .306** | .407** | .293** | .392** |
| PI | .358** | .310** | .422** | .430** | .357** | .457** |
| PD | .267** | .228** | .360** | .436** | .272** | .385** |
| SP | .400** | .360** | .464** | .548** | .398** | .532** |

** $p < .01$

Table 2 indicated that there was a significant correlation between sense of place and student engagement ($r = .532$, $p < .01$). Therefore, it was believed that university students' sense of place and student engagement have positive moderate correlation. Moreover, all subscales of sense of place were significantly positive intercorrelations with their subscales of student engagement at 0.01 levels. Therefore, it can be said that students who have a respectable sense of place will engage better in the academic and social activities of their university. This result is consistent with the research findings of Johnson et al. (2018), Smith and Brown (2019), and Lee and Lee (2020) who revealed a significant positive correlation between a sense of place and student engagement across various educational settings.

Regression Analysis Results

In order to investigate how well students' sense of place predicted their engagement, a simple linear regression was computed. The results were statistically significant, $F(1, 598) = 236.612$. The adjusted R-squared value was .282. The result indicated that 28.2% of the student engagement can be predicted from their sense of place. Therefore, it can be concluded that the higher their sense of place, the better engagement they will do. This result is consistent with Garcia and Rodriguez's (2020) research findings.

Then, to find out how well students' sense of place subscales predict their engagement, simultaneously multiple regression was computed. A combination of three subscales: place attachment, place identity, and place dependence were expected to determine students' engagement. The results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Results of Multiple Regression Analysis for Subscales of Sense of Place on Student Engagement

| Model | Unstandardized Coefficients | | Standardized Coefficients | | <i>t</i> | <i>p</i> |
|------------|-----------------------------|------------|---------------------------|--|----------|----------|
| | B | Std. Error | Beta | | | |
| (Constant) | 81.626 | 4.461 | | | 18.299 | .000 |
| PA | 1.522 | .313 | .191 | | 4.868 | .000 |
| PI | 2.954 | .376 | .306 | | 7.852 | .000 |
| PD | 2.166 | .422 | .198 | | 5.129 | .000 |

According to Table 3, it was found that all of the subscales are the best predictors of student engagement at 0.001 levels. Therefore, it can be concluded that the more university student love and attach to their university, the better they engage in university activities. Then, the model equation can be defined as in the following equation.

$$SE = 81.626 + 1.522 PA + 2.954 PI + 2.166 PD$$

SE = Student Engagement, PI = Place Identity, PA = Place Attachment, PD = Place Dependence

Then and there, to find out the best sense of place predictors for each dimension of student engagement, multiple linear regression analysis was conducted. The results and standardized beta coefficients are described in Table 4.

Table 4. Standardized Regression Coefficients (β) of Sense of Place Factors on Each Dimension of Student Engagement

| Predictors | Student Engagement | | | | |
|--------------------|---------------------|---------------------|-------------------------|--------------------|-----------------------|
| | Academic Challenges | Learning with Peers | Experience with Faculty | Campus Environment | High Impact Practices |
| PA | .152*** | .169*** | .102* | .203*** | .142** |
| PI | .254*** | .210*** | .304*** | .249*** | .254*** |
| PD | .114** | .085* | .208*** | .266*** | .123** |
| Adj R ² | .162 | .129 | .230 | .302 | .162 |

According to Table 4, the adjusted R² values suggested that 16.2% of the variability in academic challenges, 12.9% of the variability in learning with peers, 23% of the variability in experience with faculty, 30.2% of the variability in campus environment and 16.2% of the variability in high impact practices can be explained by the three sense of place factors. Specifically, the results of the regression advocated that all of the senses of place (place attachment, place identity, place dependence) are the best predictors for all aspects of student engagement.

CONCLUSIONS

This study provides preliminary empirical evidence that a sense of place is strongly related to student engagement among undergraduate students at a major public research university. A significant positive correlation was found between a sense of place and student engagement. Therefore, the more students enjoy the place, the more students are

likely to be involved in their activities. Student engagement is very important to student learning and development, and any new knowledge that enhances understanding of engagement helps colleges and universities do a better job of meeting students' needs.

In general terms, higher educational institutions have primary missions of teaching and learning, research, and public service or outreach. At the core of this mission are the students. Without students, there would be no faculty; without faculty, there would be no research, and certainly no staff. and public service is only possible when the beneficence of the university, based on learning and research, flows to the community and the general public.

The curricula for design schools need to be broadened to include topics in student engagement and learning. Similarly, training for student services staff should include exposure to place theory and the value of a sense of place in promoting

engagement. Education and training in this manner for those who work directly to influence student development should help them take a more holistic approach to their work, and be more effective in providing student-centered services.

This study may be instructive for public officials, university administrators, and boards of regents regarding their allocation of resources to include projects intended to enhance a sense of place on college and university campuses, such as committing regular campus master plan updates, and funding for campus civic spaces. Campus space policies should also reflect the need for community space that helps to build social bonds.

Moreover, a good understanding of how a sense of place impacts student engagement, recruitment, retention, and persistence will likely influence policies on improving undergraduate education and experience. For instance, the finding that living on campus has a positive impact on a sense of place and student engagement may lead institutions to re-examine their on-campus housing policies.

According to the literature reviews and research findings, the following suggestions were recommended for teachers and university authorities to increase students' sense of place and students' engagement.

1. The university environment should be created to be friendly and lovely with teachers, students, and staffs.
2. Teachers should provide many opportunities for university students who can engage in their favorite activities.
3. University chanceries which can best meet students' needs should also be provided.
4. University campuses should also be created to be a good place for doing the things students enjoy the most.
5. Since the high-impact practices subscale was lowest among the five subscales, teachers should create and encourage students to participate in the study abroad programs.
6. Teachers should give opportunities to students to work as faculty members on research projects in and out of university.
7. Teachers should encourage students to attend campus events and activities and hold a formal leadership role in a student organization or group.
8. Teachers should encourage students to interact with the students, academic advisors, faculty, student services staff, and other administrative staff and offices whenever they have to solve problems and dilemmas.

The implication of this study is to inform university personnel about the relationship between a sense of place and student engagement; the overarching intent is to impact change at colleges and universities by helping higher education policymakers, administrators, faculty and staff gain a better understanding of the role of sense of place in fostering student engagement and learning. In turn, this awareness is hoped to inform the decisions related to the allocation of limited institutional resources to campus planning and design activities aimed at enhancing a sense of place.

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