



A Study of Sophomore Dilemma Based on Students' Engagement

Yu Xiao^{1*}

¹Research Institute for Higher Education, Fudan University, Shanghai, China.

Author's contribution

The sole author designed the study, managed the analyses of the study, managed the literature search, performed the statistical analysis, wrote the protocol and wrote the manuscript. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Article Information

DOI: 10.9734/AJESS/2020/v10i130261

Editor(s):

(1) Dr. M. Camino Escolar-Llamazares, University of Burgos, Spain.

Reviewers:

(1) Abdul-Wahab Ibrahim, Sule Lamido University, Nigeria.

(2) Pooja Mistry, Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda, India.

Complete Peer review History: <http://www.sdiarticle4.com/review-history/59758>

Original Research Article

Received 06 June 2020
Accepted 13 August 2020
Published 19 August 2020

ABSTRACT

Aim: This study investigates the Sophomore Dilemma about students' engagement.

Study Design: This research was designed using a combination of quantitative and qualitative approach.

Place and Duration of Study: This study was conducted in 2018 from October to December, in Shanghai China.

Methodology: Subjects were 176 students in F university. Data collection techniques using questionnaire and interview. Data analysis using stata14.

Results: There is a significant difference of grade in students' learning engagement. Sophomores are less engaged in learning than those from other grades. They feel anxious, depressed, compelled and lonely, because of the contrast between reality and ideal, difficulty in keeping up with courses and loss of aim. The challenges of second-year students include academic life, individual expectations, social relationships, and extracurricular activities. We can establish or institutionalize efforts for sophomores from different aspects.

Conclusion: The study concludes that there is a sophomore dilemma during college in terms of students' learning engagement.

Keywords: Sophomore dilemma; students' engagement; mixed research.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

Since the 1990s, Higher Education has become internationalized and diversified. An increasing number of students have opportunities to be admitted by universities. At the same time, the quality of higher education has gradually become the focus of the world.

College students' learning is a direct manifestation of the quality of higher education. College students' engagement, which exerts influences on student's learning efficiency, is a hot issue in the field of student learning. An optimal level of involvement in academic and social activities positively affects student development. As one of the most important means to evaluate the quality of higher education, the status of students' learning engagement has drawn more and more attention of domestic and foreign scholars. There are increasing number of college students who are experiencing academic difficulties. At the same time, various social problems related to college students are frequently reported in newspapers. Many college students will experience a bottleneck period during the learning phase. Sophomore Dilemma have become popular words on the Internet, and the media have called on universities to pay more attention to this phenomenon.

The college students' learning engagement: Kuh defined students' engagement as the extent of time and effort that students devote to educational activities for expected and desired outcomes [1]. Kuh believes that students' learning engagement not only has an important impact on the personal development, but also has great significance for improving the quality of higher education [1]. The core element to measure the quality of education is the level of student engagement. This study expounds the concept of students' engagement from three aspects, namely, behavior engagement, emotion engagement and cognition engagement. Behavior engagement refers to the degree of effort and academic performance in learning; emotion engagement is students' emotion expressed in completing the learning tasks; the cognition engagement is students' perception and belief of their self-esteem, the school, teachers and classmates.

The sophomore dilemma is commonly conceptualized as a significant decline in comprehensive performance during students' second year [2]. The measurement indicators are learning attitude, learning engagement, learning effect and emotional experience. The students' learning engagement is divided into three parts: vitality, dedication and concentration.

1.2 Content of the Study

This study investigates the Sophomore Dilemma about students' engagement. College students' learning is not a smooth process, but a process full of difficulties. Successfully resolving the predicament can help students better adapt to college life. The objective of the study is to explore the Sophomore Dilemma about students' engagement. Based on the above, the questions to be answered in this study are as follows:

1. Is there a sophomore dilemma during college in terms of students' learning engagement?
2. What are the reasons for the emergence of college students' sophomore dilemma?
3. How to help college students resolve the sophomore dilemma?

The study proposes the following hypotheses:

1. There is no significant difference of grade in students' learning engagement.
2. Sophomores aren't less engaged in learning than those from other grades.

1.3 Significance of the Study

In theory, this study is an effort to contribute to the body of knowledge concerning factors of college student success. It can broaden the research perspective of college students' learning engagement. The literature for sophomore dilemma is vast; however, looking specifically at students' engagement is a new perspective. It is conducive to expanding the research theory of grade differentiation of college students' learning engagement and enriching the research achievements in this field. This study could refine researches about students' engagement. It also can provide a realistic basis for the teaching reform and clarify the influencing factors of the sophomore dilemma. At the same time, the results of this study will promote the research field of college students' learning

engagement from theoretical research to empirical research.

In practice, the results of this study are conducive to helping students who are in sophomore dilemma to get out of the predicament. In this way, students can achieve new achievements in learning. At the same time, the information gleaned from this study can benefit educators, parents, and students. The result of this research could provide some references when universities make relevant decisions. Finally, it is able to promote the overall quality of Higher Education in China.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This section would have a brief review of precious studies on college students' engagement and sophomore dilemma both at home and abroad.

2.1 Previous Studies on College Students' Engagement

In terms of concept definition, there are mainly two viewpoints in foreign countries. One view is that students' learning engagement is a meta-concept including three aspects of behavior, emotion and cognition [3]. This point is widely adopted by domestic and overseas scholars. Its representative figure is Fredricks. The other view is that learning engagement can be described as the amount of time and effort engaged in effective educational practice [4]. Its representative figure is Balwant. There are many similar terms to describe students' engagement including academic engagement, learning engagement and school engagement [5]. The researches which focus on students' engagement experienced a changing process from quantity to a combination of quality and quantity [6]. Meanwhile, numerous measurement instruments were developed to evaluate students' engagement and explore the corresponding influencing factors [7]. The survey of America's college students' engagement is the most influential, and many countries have followed the research [8]. As for the influencing factors, Imlawi made a summary of the influencing factors such as teacher-student relationship, learning motivation, academic self-regulation and self-efficacy [9].

The researches on students' engagement in China are mainly based on the previous studies abroad and gradually developed into a heated research topic due to its significance. Chinese

scholars believe that students' learning engagement includes behavior, emotion and cognition. Some researchers hold the view that students' engagement is the extent of effort engaged in academic activities for mastering basic skills [10]. Meanwhile, a lot of measurement instruments were modified and introduced to China to evaluate students' engagement. Cooperating with Indiana University, Tsinghua University introduced and developed the National Survey of Student Engagement-China (NSSA-China) by three steps including translation, culture adaption and cognitive interview based on NSSE. "UWES-S Learning Engagement Scale" has been revised, and the revised scale has good reliability and validity [7]. Large numbers of literature on students' engagement are also summarized by researchers at home to serve as reference and guidance in this field [11]. Its representative figure is Wang, but the reasons for the formation of such differences were not explored.

2.2 Previous Studies on Sophomore Dilemma

Western research on the college students' learning has a history of nearly 40 years. Freedman first proposed the concept of "sophomore dilemma" [12]. In the second year of study, the development of academic self-efficacy is threatened as workload demands increase and content complexity becomes more rigorous and students are faced with the challenge of achieving competence at a higher intellectual and developmental level [13]. From 2007 to 2010, Duke University of the United States conducted a survey of the "sophomore low tide" phenomenon of the students for four consecutive years. The survey found that the students had more psychological pressure in the sophomore period. The sophomore year is considered to be the most stressful year in the learning process [14]. In recent years, researchers in the United States have found that sophomores have the highest dropout rate and are prone to encountering some problems such as loss of interest in selected courses, insufficient engagement in learning and difficulties in interpersonal communication [15]. Many foreign scholars proposed some suggestions for the sophomore dilemma, such as giving targeted instruction to sophomores and organizing senior students to share their experiences with sophomores [16].

There are few studies on the sophomore dilemma in China. Most of the existing researches focus on psychological conditions,

interpersonal relationships, academic performance, learning attitudes, learning engagement, learning satisfaction and major recognition [17]. Studies have shown that sophomores are in a state of laze. The sophomore dilemma is the result of the increase of employment pressure and the lack of self-management and long-term plan [10]. At the same time, similar views with American scholars have emerged, arguing that this phenomenon is the result of a combination of values conflicts, role transitions and difficulties in interpersonal communication. Scholars have proposed suggestions in terms of school, society, and student [18]. Its representative figure is Lu whose proposal is to establish a tutor system.

2.3 Literature Comment

Researchers do with the study of college students' learning engagement from the theoretical level, and they have formulated the common opinion about the definition. The existing researches analyze the phenomenon of the sophomore dilemma from the theoretical level and propose some solutions. However, there are still some areas for further research. On the one hand, most of the existing researches have analyzed the phenomenon of sophomore dilemma from the theoretical level, and few empirical researches have been conducted. On the other hand, most of the existing studies have explained the phenomenon of sophomores dilemma in terms of psychological anxiety. There are few studies on learning engagement.

2.4 Possible Innovation of the Study

In terms of research method, this study used a combination of empirical research and qualitative research. The questionnaire can offer accurate information on large numbers of individuals, allowing for credible information at a reasonable

cost. The interview can obtain a lot of information implied in the phenomenon. The two methods can complement each other.

In terms of research object, this study will focus on the point of learning engagement. An optimal level of involvement in academic and social activities positively affects student development and outcomes.

3. METHODS

Research design: The study is carried out in F university, Shanghai, China. The quite good learning atmosphere of F University makes the data more representative. The specific research methods are questionnaire method and interview method. The reasons for using the questionnaire method in this study are as follows: Firstly, the questionnaire method is a standardized survey method, which is conducive to avoiding the interference of subjective factors. Secondly, the questionnaire method is anonymous, which is convenient for the respondents to express their ideas truly. Finally, a large-scale research can be conducted. The interview method can be presented in detail through a face-to-face interview. Using in-depth interviews, we can know their inner ideas. So, we can get more comprehensive, vivid and reliable information.

Population: The population of the study was made up of all grades in F university.

Sampling technique: When we determine the number of selected students in each department, we use the means of simple random sampling. This sampling method can guarantee the representativeness of the sample.

Sample size: The sample size for this study uses 176 cases for questionnaire and 10 students for interview ranging from freshmen to seniors. Their majors cover science, engineering, literature, social science and medicine.

Table 1. Basic information of the interviewees

Number	Grade	Gender	Major
A1	Freshman	Male	Chinese language and literature
A2	Freshman	Female	mathematics
A3	Sophomore	Female	computer science and technology
A4	Sophomore	Male	philosophy
A5	Sophomore	Male	basic medicine
A6	Junior	Female	chemistry
A7	Junior	Male	software science
A8	Junior	Female	journalism
A9	Senior	Male	sociology
A10	Senior	Female	microelectronics

Data collection: Data collection of the study was done using a questionnaire of the structured type and interviews. The questionnaire used in this study is the UWES-S Learning Input Scale which is translated and revised by Fang Laitan [7]. The questionnaire is divided into three parts: vitality, dedication and concentration. It has a total of 17 questions. This questionnaire uses the five-point method, which is expressed as 1-5 from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”. This interview uses semi-open structured outlines. The interview outline mainly involves changes and reasons for learning engagement during the college.

Data analysis: The data were entered into the appropriate categories using stata14. The researcher relied on the subjective descriptions of the interviewees to understand changes and reasons for learning engagement during the college.

4. FINDINGS OR DISCUSSION

4.1 Grade Differences on Students’ Engagement

As can be seen from the above tables, in the samples, the average score of the second year’s learning engagement is the lowest, which shows that, in general, sophomores are less engaged in learning than those from other grades.

As can be seen from the above table, there is a significant difference in learning engagement ($t=10.674$, $p<0.05$) between the second year and the first year. In the interview, we find that many

freshmen still stick to the habits formed in high school. Many freshmen kept the habit of self-study. There is a huge difference in learning engagement ($t=10.997$, $p<0.05$) between the second year and the third year. Respondents say that the third year is the most busy year and they are very clear about their plans for the future. Some interviewees say that they are preparing for postgraduate entrance examinations, civil service examinations, and teacher qualification examinations in the third year. Compared with the fourth year, the second year have huge differences in learning engagement ($t=9.997$, $p<0.05$). Students are willing to devote more time to study at this stage.

At the same time, we can learn from the interviews that sophomores feel anxious, depressed, compelled and alone, because of the difference between reality and ideal, difficulty in keeping up with courses and loss of aim. A3 said, “I have no friends. I often failed in the exams. I gradually lost faith in myself.” The challenges of second-year students include academic life, social relationships, and extracurricular activities. A4 described it: “I could think of two different things—one is that someone gets lazy within the second year and feels like it is not that exciting anymore.”

4.2 Reasons for the Sophomore Dilemma

The study found that the challenges of second-year students include academic life, individual expectations, social relationships, and extracurricular activities by interviewing.

Table 2. General description of students’ engagement from different grade

Grade	N	Score of Engagement
Freshman	42	3.871
Sophomore	48	2.225
Junior	44	3.418
Senior	42	3.015

Table 3. Grade differences on some questions

Question	Freshman	Sophomore	Junior	Senior
Time flies when I am studying.	3.462	2.891	3.231	3.108
When I get up in the morning, I feel like going to class.	3.783	3.121	3.976	3.657
When I’m doing work as a student, I feel bursting with energy.	3.214	2.897	3.015	3.384
My study inspires me.	3.132	3.021	3.247	3.421

Table 4. Grade differences on students' engagement

Grade	n	Score of Engagement	SD	t	Sig.
Sophomore	48	2.225	2.456	10.674	.000
Freshman	42	3.871	3.432		
Sophomore	48	2.225	4.654	10.997	.000
Junior	44	3.418	2.445		
Sophomore	48	2.225	3.096	9.997	.000
Senior	42	3.015	2.125		

At present, in terms of the course of the curriculum, most colleges and universities focus on the basic courses in the first year, and add the professional courses in the second year. In the interview, many sophomores who major in science and engineering said that they had encountered many difficulties in professional courses, which greatly affected their enthusiasm for study.

Many students are full of expectations for their college life when they entered college. After one year's study, they have shown great differences in their scores, and some students even have failed exams. This sense of loss has reduced the enthusiasm of some students to some degree. As a result, some sophomores lost confidence in learning. Sophomores may be overwhelmed by discrepancies between their expectations and the realities of college and may be less likely than students at other levels to be actively involved at college.

The social support system for college students is mainly composed of three parts, namely, parents, counselors and peers. During the first year, both parents and counselors give students a lot of attention. These social support systems tend to provide less support to students at this point than they provided in the students' first year. A5 said, "In the second year, the togetherness is gone because we have different plans and are busy with our own courses." A3, a computer science and technology major, considered sophomores to be in need of someone such as a mentor to talk to in general, both about academics and personal life issues: "Not even just a counselor, just someone maybe even in the same major."

In the first year, college students are more likely to spend most of their spare time on club and after class activities. However, in the second year, many students withdraw from these activities, so they have a lot of spare time. As self-management is the core of college students' learning, in the absence of supervision, many sophomores seem to be doing nothing all day. A5

said, "In the first year they tell us everything we should do. In the second year they don't really tell us what to do."

4.3 Recommendations

Establish a professional tutor system. The core of the tutor system is to establish a "cooperation" relationship between teachers and students. The teachers should guide students according to their individual differences. As for the interview, some students hope that tutor can guide not only their academic, but also their life.

Universities should arrange courses reasonably. The course provide an important microecological environment for students to grow up and has a subtle influence on students' learning and development. Universities should adjust the curriculum structure and optimize the proportion of each course.

Counselors are supposed to do their best to help sophomores. They should communicate more with sophomores regularly and try to understand students' confusion in learning, life, and emotion. A6 said: "I needed someone to talk to so I went to the personal counseling in the second year."

Sophomores should conduct self-education. They should brave the challenge and seek the way out of the predicament actively. It is essential for sophomores to increase their own self-efficacy, correct learning motivation and turn to significant others for help. Sophomores should know that what they are experiencing is normal. A9 said: "Time management is the key to helping us successfully getting through the second year."

5. CONCLUSION

The study concludes that there is a sophomore dilemma during college in terms of students' learning engagement. The study also finds that the challenges of second-year students include academic life, individual expectations, social relationships, and extracurricular activities by

interviewing. It requires the joint efforts of university, teachers, society and students themselves to solve sophomore dilemma.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

REFERENCES

1. Kuh GD. What we're learning about student engagement from NSSE: Benchmarks for effective educational practices. *Change*. 2003;2:24-32.
2. Gahagan J, Stuart Hunter M. Engaging sophomores: attending to the needs of second-year students. *Coll Univ*. 2008;3:46-49.
3. Fredricks J. School Engagement: Potential of the Concept, State of the Evidence. *Review of Educational Research*. 2004; 1: 60-64.
4. Balwant P. The meaning of student engagement and disengagement in the classroom context: lessons from organizational behavior. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*. 2017;28:1-13.
5. Kahu ER. Framing student engagement in higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*. 2013;5:758-773.
6. Gerald F. Student engagement: developing a conceptual framework and survey instrument. *Journal of Education for Business*. 2015;4:224-229.
7. Fang LT, Shi K, Zhang FH. Research on reliability and validity of Utrecht work engagement Scale-student. *Chinese Journal of Clinical Psychology*. 2008;6:618-620.
8. Tang Q, Peng SH. A review of the research on college students' learning investment. *Journal of Suzhou University*. 2014;2:110-113.
9. Imlawi J, Gregg D, Karimi J. Student engagement in course-based social networks: The impact of instructor credibility and use of communication. *Computers & Education*. 2015;2:84-96.
10. Cao ZY, Ou YJ. Analysis of psychological characteristics and health education strategies of college students of different grades. *Chinese Journal of School Health*. 2009;8:699-700.
11. Wang YS. The empirical research on the college student engagement in China-Based on the Data NCSS (2012). *China Higher Education Research*. 2013;1:32-36.
12. Freedman MB. The passage through college. *Journal of Social Issues*. 1956;4:13-27.
13. Gahagan J, Stuart Hunter M. Engaging sophomores: attending to the needs of second-year students. *Coll Univ*. 2008;3:46-49.
14. Lipka S. After the freshman bubble pops. *Chronicle of Higher Education*. 2006;3:42-46.
15. Zepke N. Student engagement research in higher education: questioning an academic orthodoxy. *Teaching in Higher Education*. 2014;6:697-708.
16. Tobolowsky BF, Cox BE. Shedding light on sophomores: An exploration of the second college year. *Chronicle of Higher Education*. 2007;3:41-44.
17. Lv SX. Causes and countermeasures of the low tide phenomenon in sophomore year. *China Higher Education*. 2015;10:56-58.
18. Lu W. Focus on the second year of illness: the discussion and countermeasures of the phenomenon of the second-year students in colleges and universities. *China Adult Education*. 2015;7:66-68.

© 2020 Xiao; This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Peer-review history:
The peer review history for this paper can be accessed here:
<http://www.sdiarticle4.com/review-history/59758>