Student-to-Faculty Connectedness as a Dominant Predictor of First-Year Student Satisfaction: A Post-Pandemic Services Marketing Perspective

Wendy Gillis
University of North Florida

Kimberly Bynum
Flagler College

Amanda Kulp
University of North Florida

Higher education institutions have long debated the fundamental problem of whether student connectedness or student involvement plays a more crucial role in first-year student satisfaction. Analyzing National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) data for first-year cohorts before and after the COVID-19 pandemic (n = 2,306), we empirically test hypotheses related to the guiding research question: Which one is a bigger predictor of student satisfaction in higher education: student connectedness or student involvement? In addition to applying services marketing to higher education, we compared pre-pandemic and post-pandemic student satisfaction data. Regression results suggest that while both student connectedness and involvement positively impact satisfaction, student connectedness emerges as the stronger predictor. Specifically, student connectedness to faculty (versus to other students) matters more to satisfaction than student involvement. A lot more.

Keywords: student-to-faculty connectedness, student involvement, student satisfaction, services marketing

INTRODUCTION

Reevaluating Student Satisfaction Through a Services Marketing Lens

Higher education institutions are facing increasing pressure to adapt to the evolving expectations of contemporary students, particularly those from Generation Z. As student populations become more diverse and digitally integrated, traditional frameworks for understanding student engagement may no longer fully capture the mechanisms that drive student satisfaction. Theories of student involvement (Astin, 1984) and student integration (Tinto, 1993) have long posited that when students invest time and effort into both academic and social aspects of college life, they experience more favorable outcomes—including retention, achievement, and satisfaction. Subsequent research has expanded on these models to emphasize the significance of a student's sense of belonging and connectedness within academic environments (Kuh et al., 2008).

Despite their conceptual overlap, involvement and connectedness remain theoretically distinct constructs. In practice, however, institutions often conflate them, leading to broad, resource-intensive strategies that lack empirical precision and often fail to generate measurable improvements in student outcomes (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009; McMurtrie, 2022). These challenges have only intensified in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted traditional modes of campus engagement and created a bifurcation between pre- and post-pandemic Generation Z students (Selingo, 2021; Bass, 2023).

To address these challenges, this study draws on concepts from the services marketing literature—particularly service-dominant logic and relationship marketing—to reevaluate the drivers of first-year student satisfaction. Our guiding research question asks: Which is a stronger predictor of first-year student satisfaction—student involvement or student-to-faculty connectedness?

Using NSSE data from first-year students at a large regional university in the southeastern United States, we examine satisfaction through the lens of the university as a service provider and students as active co-creators of value. This perspective reflects a shift toward viewing student satisfaction not merely as an academic outcome but as a key service performance metric, analogous to customer satisfaction in commercial service contexts (Kotler & Keller, 2016).

We test two hypotheses:

H1: Student involvement is positively associated with student satisfaction.

H2: Student-to-faculty connectedness is positively associated with student satisfaction.

Our empirical analysis confirms both hypotheses; however, the effect size for student-to-faculty connectedness substantially exceeds that of involvement. These findings suggest that fostering meaningful faculty-student relationships may yield greater returns on institutional efforts to improve student satisfaction than broad-based involvement strategies alone.

This study contributes to both higher education and marketing theory by illustrating how service-oriented concepts can clarify institutional priorities, especially in the context of constrained resources and post-pandemic student needs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Generation Z and Shifting Expectations in Higher Education

Generation Z, typically defined as "individuals born between 1995 and 2010", has come of age during a period marked by rapid technological change, global uncertainty, and increasing societal complexity (Agarwal & Vaghela, 2019, p.3). Members of this cohort are characterized by a strong preference for transparency, authenticity, and digital fluency (Francis & Hoefel, 2018). While this generation is often praised for its connectivity, paradoxically, they also report heightened levels of loneliness and decreased face-to-face social interaction (Twenge, 2017).

The COVID-19 pandemic has further complicated the higher education experience for Generation Z. Students who began college before 2020 experienced a relatively traditional onboarding process, while their post-pandemic counterparts entered under conditions of remote instruction, social distancing, and institutional uncertainty (Selingo, 2021). This bifurcation has led to new psychosocial and academic support needs among students, including a renewed emphasis on meaningful in-person interactions, emotional well-being, and purpose-driven learning (Bass, 2023; Seemiller & Grace, 2017).

These evolving preferences underscore the urgency for institutions to reevaluate their engagement strategies. Generic or undifferentiated approaches to student involvement may no longer suffice. Instead, strategies that emphasize personal connection, especially with faculty, may offer greater potential for impact in the post-pandemic landscape (Knott, 2022).

Applying Services Marketing to Higher Education

Viewing students as consumers of educational services offers a productive lens through which to analyze institutional effectiveness (Dollinger & Lodge, 2020; Dean et al., 2016). While some scholars caution against overextending consumer metaphors in educational contexts (Khalifa, 2009), service-dominant logic (Vargo & Lusch, 2004) provides a useful framework for understanding how value in higher education is co-created through relationships, interactions, and shared experiences.

In this model, value is not embedded solely in course content or institutional prestige but rather emerges from the dynamic interplay between students and service providers—namely, faculty, staff, and administrative systems (Lusch & Vargo, 2006). Institutions that recognize and facilitate this co-creation process are more likely to retain students, foster loyalty, and generate positive word-of-mouth—outcomes that have long been emphasized in service marketing (Vivek et al., 2012).

The Role of Satisfaction and Relationship Marketing

Satisfaction in higher education parallels its role in commercial services, reflecting the alignment between expectations and actual experiences (Zeithaml et al., 1996; Wu, 2011). Satisfied students are more likely to persist, engage, and advocate for their institutions (Chat et al., 2010). Within this framework, Relationship Marketing theory (Morgan & Hunt, 1994) is particularly relevant. It posits that long-term value is created through trust, commitment, and mutual benefit—attributes increasingly critical in the contemporary educational environment.

In educational settings, the faculty-student relationship serves as a key locus for relationship marketing. Faculty members who engage in rapport-building, provide affirmation, and foster dialogue create environments where students feel supported and empowered (Tani et al., 2021). These interactions are not merely instrumental; they are central to students' overall satisfaction and sense of institutional fit (Berry, 1995).

Defining and Differentiating Connectedness and Involvement

Student-to-faculty connectedness refers to students' perception of meaningful, supportive relationships with instructional staff. It encompasses feelings of belonging, psychological safety, and interpersonal trust (Hagerty et al., 1993; MacLeod et al., 2019). Importantly, connectedness extends beyond formal academic interactions to include students' broader sense of being known and valued by faculty members (Lee & Robbins, 1995). By contrast, student involvement—rooted in Astin's (1984) theory—is defined by the quantity and quality of students' physical and psychological investment in academic and extracurricular activities. Involvement is behaviorally observable and emphasizes time-on-task, attendance, and activity participation (Sa, 2023).

While the two constructs are related, they are not synonymous. Involvement focuses on effort and action; connectedness emphasizes relationship and emotional resonance. Distinguishing between them is critical for institutional leaders aiming to deploy targeted engagement strategies. Our study builds on this theoretical distinction by empirically examining which construct better predicts student satisfaction in a post-pandemic context.

METHODOLOGY

The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) collects information annually at four-year colleges and universities about the participation of first-year and senior students in programs and activities provided by their institutions for learning and personal development. NSSE is a self-supporting auxiliary unit in the Indiana University School of Education. The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) is "the most pervasive attempt to study student engagement in higher education. Indeed, it is the success and the widespread use of the NSSE that has significantly contributed to the popularity of the student engagement concept" (Zhoc et al., 2019, p. 222).

The authors used pre- and post-pandemic secondary data. We looked at pre-pandemic and post and pandemic NSSE data from Southeastern University, a large, public research institution in a metropolitan

area in the southeastern U.S. Southeastern University's undergraduate enrollment during the study period included approximately 14,000 students, of which around 2,400 students were freshmen. Due to its metropolitan location and a large network of community college students in the area, the university has a high proportion of transfer students, resulting in a relatively small number of freshmen who begin at the university.

Upon IRB approval for the use of de-identified data, the researchers utilized a dataset comprising first-year student responses from three time points: pre-pandemic data included n = 1,078 first-year students from Spring 2017 and n = 1,038 first-year students from Spring 2019. The university's response rates on the NSSE in those two years were 49% and 51%, respectively, due in part to the use of a small, guaranteed incentive in the form of a $5 coupon for the first 1,000 students to complete the survey. Post-pandemic data included 657 first-year students from Spring 2022, and the university's response rate was 30%, using the exact same incentive structure as in 2017 and 2019.

In total, the complete dataset, including all three survey years, comprised n = 2,306 first-year students. Prior to delivering the data to the researchers, the institution supplied a few variables from the university's student information system, including an indicator on whether the student was retained for the following year and returned to the university as a sophomore. This study treats these data as empirical evidence presented to support the hypothesis that student connectedness and student involvement have a positive and statistically significant impact on student satisfaction.

The Model: Student Satisfaction Predictors | Pre Versus Post-Pandemic

Figure 1 is a visual representation of the model tested to determine which factor, connectedness or involvement, was a stronger predictor of student satisfaction in higher education. The researchers in this study used two independent variables —connectedness and involvement — and one dependent variable: satisfaction. For student-to-faculty connectedness, we selected NSEE questions that focused on aspects such as the quality of interactions with students and faculty, and how often students spoke with faculty outside of class in various situations. For student involvement, we selected NSSE questions that focused on aspects such as the amount of time students estimated they spent preparing for class and participating in co-curricular activities. Further, we compared the same independent and dependent variables both pre- and post-COVID pandemic.

FIGURE 1
PRE-PANDEMIC AND POST-PANDEMIC HYPOTHESES TESTING
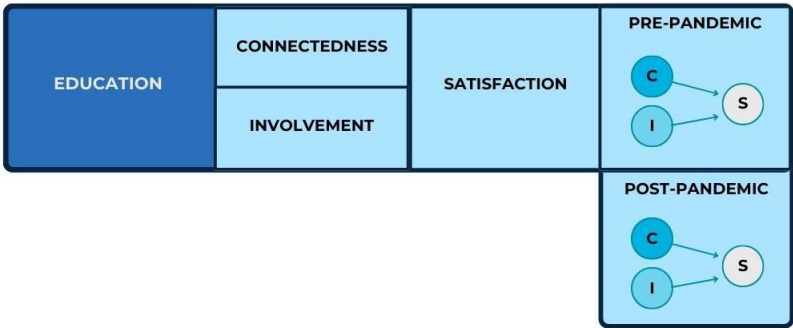
Hypotheses Testing

Guided by our model, we used one dependent variable in this study: student satisfaction. Student satisfaction was measured using an item from the NSSE, with the following prompt: "How would you evaluate your entire educational experience at this institution?" (NSSE, 2022). Response options were on a 1-4 scale, with the coding of Poor (1), Fair (2), Good (3), Excellent (4).
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H1: *Student connectedness will have a positive impact on student satisfaction, both pre and post-COVID.*

We measured student connectedness using established variables from the NSSE, choosing items that occurred across the 2017, 2019, and 2022 instances of the survey without alteration. The first NSSE item chosen used the prompt "Indicate the quality of your interactions with the following people at your institution" (NSSE, 2022). Response options were on a scale of 1 to 7, where 1 = Poor and 7 = Excellent.

    (1) Faculty
    (2) Students

Additional NSSE items selected to measure connectedness all used the prompt "During the current school year, about how often have you done the following?" (NSSE, 2022). Response options were on a 1-4 scale, using the following coding: Never (1), Sometimes (2), Often (3), and Very often (4).

    1) "Talked about career plans with a faculty member"
    2) "Worked with a faculty member on activities other than coursework (committees, student groups, etc.)"
    3) "Discussed course topics, ideas, or concepts with a faculty member outside of class"
    4) "Discussed your academic performance with a faculty member" (NSSE, 2022)

H2: *Student involvement will have a positive impact on student satisfaction both pre and post-COVID.*

We incorporated two items into our measurement of student involvement that assessed the average amount of time students estimate spending on their experiences per week during the first year of college. The prompt for these items was "About how many hours do you spend in a typical 7-day week doing the following?" (NSSE, 2022). Response options included numeric values of 0, 1-5, 6-10, 11-15, 16-20, 21-25, 26-30, more than 30 hours per week.

    (1) "Preparing for class (studying, reading, writing, doing homework or lab work, analyzing data, rehearsing, and other academic activities)"
    (2) "Participating in co-curricular activities (organizations, campus publications, student government, fraternity or sorority, intercollegiate or intramural sports, etc.)" (NSSE, 2022)

Students in the pre-pandemic (n = 2,116) and post-pandemic (n = 657) groups were demographically similar and had the typical characteristics of the incoming first-year student body at Southeastern University. Around two-thirds of the students were female, while about one-third were male. Small percentages of students reported being of another gender identity. The majority of students were White, though the post-pandemic sample had generally more representation of students of color than the pre-pandemic sample. Black and African American students comprised 8.8% of the sample in the pre-pandemic group and 18.2% of the post-pandemic group.

The representation of Asian or Asian-American students and Hispanic or Latino/a students also increased slightly in terms of proportionality with the post-pandemic group. Finally, the percentage of first-generation students also increased proportionally in the post-pandemic sample, going from 34.6% to 44.3%. In other words, the survey sample at Southeastern University became slightly more female, slightly more diverse in terms of race and ethnicity, and slightly more first-generation compared to the pre-pandemic period, when considering students who responded to the NSSE survey.

TABLE 1
DEMOGRAPHIC STATISTICS

Variable	Pre-Pandemic N (%)	Post-Pandemic N (%)
Gender identity[1]		
Man	627 (36.1)	132 (27.1)
Woman	1,088 (62.6)	344 (70.6)
Another gender identity	24 (1.4)	11 (2.3)
Race and ethnicity		
Asian or Asian-American	133 (7.4)	67 (12.9)
Alaska Native or American Indian	42 (2.4)	18 (3.5)
Black or African-American	155 (8.8)	92 (18.3)
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	23 (1.5)	<10 (1.0)[2]
Hispanic or Latino/a	247 (14.1)	93 (18.5)
White	1,286 (76.0)	304 (58.6)
Prefer not to respond	36 (2.0)	14 (2.7)
First generation	606 (34.6)	222 (44.3)
	Mean (SD)	**Mean (SD)**
High school GPA upon admission to Southeastern University	3.81 (0.47)	3.85 (0.46)

1 Gender identity response options come from NSSE and are student self-reported.
2 Due to counts of fewer than 10, the exact number of students in this category is reported as a percentage only.

From an academic perspective, cohorts of students before and after the pandemic were comparable. The high school GPA upon college admission for both cohorts was between 3.80 and 3.90 on a four-point GPA scale, and similarly, students' cumulative college GPAs as the end of the first full year of college were also comparable, within 0.05 grade points of each other. Table 2 describes their academic characteristics:

TABLE 2
ACADEMIC CHARACTERISTICS

Variable	Pre-Pandemic Mean (SD)	Post-Pandemic Mean (SD)
High School GPA Upon Admission to College	3.82 (0.47)	3.87 (0.43)
Freshman Year Cumulative GPA	2.95 (0.87)	3.00 (0.92)

RESULTS

Student Connectedness' Influence on Student Satisfaction

A one-way ANOVA revealed small but statistically significant differences in student satisfaction between student cohorts before and after the pandemic, $F(1, 2,304) = 5.58$, $p = .018$. Students in the post-pandemic cohort would evaluate their entire educational experience at a slower lower rate of satisfaction as compared to pre-pandemic students:

TABLE 3
ONE-WAY ANOVA RESULTS ON SATISFACTION ACROSS COHORTS

Response	Pre-Pandemic N (%)	Post-Pandemic N (%)	
Poor	46 (2.6)	11 (2.1)	
Fair	243 (13.6)	76 (14.6)	
Good	917 (51.3)	307 (59.2)	
Excellent	581 (32.5)	125 (24.1)	
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	F-statistic (f)
	3.14 (0.74)	3.05 (0.69)	5.58*

Note. ***p<.001; **p<.01; *p<.05

Using means test results to identify significant differences across pre- and post-pandemic groups, when examining results disaggregated by students who successfully retained versus those who did not, the differences in how students evaluated their entire educational experiences at Southeastern University became more distinct, and the patterns were similar for both pre-pandemic and post-pandemic cohorts. In both cases, freshmen who successfully retained had significantly higher satisfaction with their educational experiences as compared to students who did not retain:

TABLE 4
MEANS TEST RESULSTS FOR SATISFACTION ACROSS COHORTS

	Pre-Pandemic N (%)	Post-Pandemic N (%)	F-statistic (f)
Pre-Pandemic Cohort	3.19 (0.71)	2.77 (0.82)	61.92***
Post-Pandemic Cohort	3.09 (0.66)	2.75 (0.81)	13.36***

Interestingly, means tests indicated that pre-pandemic and post-pandemic students reported engaging with faculty members and students in similar ways before and after the pandemic, with two exceptions: working with faculty members outside of class, and students' overall perceptions of having quality interactions with faculty members. Perhaps unsurprisingly, students in the post-pandemic cohort reported working relatively less with faculty members on activities other than coursework, such as committees and student groups, although the difference in mean scores was relatively small. The challenges of the emergency remote instruction and limited contact and opportunities for student-faculty interactions outside the classroom likely contribute to this finding.

More surprisingly, students in the post-pandemic cohort also reported having significantly higher perceptions of quality interactions with faculty members as compared to pre-pandemic cohort. One interpretation of this is that during the time of the pandemic, faculty members served as the primary contact students may have had with their university considering restrictions on social interactions, reduced opportunities to engage in campus life events, and interactions with campus support staff that the limitations of remote communications or Zoom interactions may have challenged. Whatever the reason, students in the post-pandemic cohort reported significantly higher perceptions of having quality interactions with faculty members after the pandemic, in comparison to before the pandemic:

TABLE 5
MEANS TEST RESULTS ON CONNECTEDNESS ACROSS COHORTS

Survey Items (NSEE, 2022)	Pre-Pandemic Mean (SD)	Post-Pandemic Mean (SD)	F-statistic (f)
"Talked about career plans with a faculty member"	2.43 (0.92)	2.35 (0.93)	3.00
"Worked with a faculty member on activities other than coursework (committees, student groups, etc.)"	1.86 (0.95)	1.74 (0.95)	6.12*
"Discussed course topics, ideas, or concepts with a faculty member outside of class"	2.02 (0.92)	1.97 (0.92)	1.14
"Discussed your academic performance with a faculty member"	2.26 (0.86)	2.20 (0.85)	1.47
"Quality of interactions with faculty"	5.10 (1.44)	5.32 (1.47)	8.54**
"Quality of interactions with students"	5.20 (1.46)	5.24 (1.46)	0.27

Note. ***$p<.001$; **$p<.01$; *$p<.05$

When it comes to student involvement, students in both cohorts reported spending approximately the same number of hours per week preparing for class (see Table 6). However, post-pandemic students reported having significantly fewer hours per week involved in co-curricular activities as compared to pre-pandemic cohort. Since these data were collected in Spring 2022, it is somewhat surprising that the post-pandemic cohort reported spending less time in co-curriculars, as regular campus activities had resumed at Southeastern University at the time they took the survey. This may indicate that post-pandemic students made a choice to spend fewer hours in co-curricular involvement as compared to students before the pandemic:

TABLE 6
MEANS TEST RESULTS ON STUDENT INVOLVEMENT ACROSS COHORTS

Survey Items (NSEE, 2022)	Pre-Pandemic Mean (SD)	Post-Pandemic Mean (SD)	F-statistic (f)
"Hours per week preparing for class"	4.11 (1.53)	2.54 (1.63)	0.00
"Hours per week involved in co-curricular activities"	4.11 (1.54)	2.14 (1.49)	24.82***

Note. ***$p<.001$; **$p<.01$; *$p<.05$

Multiple linear regression with an ordinal approximation estimates the model that influences student satisfaction, while controlling for background characteristics that can impact student satisfaction. This analysis indicates that there are meaningful differences in student experiences before and after the pandemic. Table 7 presents the results of two models: one specific to pre-pandemic students and the other to post-pandemic students.

Both models suggest that student connectedness variables have a positive impact on student satisfaction, specifically in terms of perceiving oneself as having quality interactions with other students and faculty. The results of these models indicate that perceiving oneself to have quality interactions with faculty members has the strongest relative influence (based on the coefficient values in each model) of students' overall evaluation of their experiences. The strength of this perception of quality interactions holds a stronger position in the overall model for post-pandemic students:

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TABLE 7
LINEAR REGRESSION RESULTS PREDICTING STUDENT SATISFACTION

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	Pre-Pandemic Cohort		Post-Pandemic Cohort	
	Pre-pandemic		Post-pandemic	
	B	SE	B	SE
Control variables				
Man (reference)	-	-	-	-
Woman	0.085	0.105	0.01	0.126
Gender - prefer not to respond	0.151	0.103	-0.004	0.118
Asian or Asian-American	0.041	0.061	-0.019	0.084
Black or African-American	-.152**	0.057	-.214**	0.075
Hispanic or Latino/a	0.02	0.048	0.005	0.073
First Generation	0.055	0.034	-0.06	0.056
High School GPA	.142***	0.035	0.063	0.062
Student Connectedness				
"Talked about career plans with a faculty member"	0.014	0.022	.094*	0.039
"Worked with a faculty member on activities other than coursework (committees, student groups, etc.)"	0.017	0.024	0.04	0.038
"Discussed course topics, ideas, or concepts with a faculty member outside of class"	-0.012	0.025	0.006	0.041
"Discussed your academic performance with a faculty member"	.062*	0.025	-0.02	0.042
"Quality of interactions with faculty"	.137***	0.013	.168***	0.022
"Quality of interactions with students"	.114***	0.013	.088***	0.022
Student Involvement				
"Hours per week preparing for class"	0.002	0.011	-.054**	0.018
"Hours per week involved in co-curricular activities"	-.028**	0.011	0.026	0.02
Model R^2	0.23***		0.30***	
Degrees of freedom	13		13	
F statistic	31.184		14.4	

DISCUSSION

The Role of Connectedness Versus Involvement: Reframing Student Satisfaction in a Post-Pandemic Context

This study analyzes NSSE data from over 2,300 undergraduate students at a Southeastern University to assess shifts in predictors of student satisfaction before and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Our findings reveal a substantive reordering of student priorities. Specifically, while both connectedness and involvement positively influenced satisfaction prior to the pandemic, their relative weights have shifted significantly post-pandemic.

Table 7 compares two regression models—one using data from pre-pandemic cohorts (2017, 2019) and one from the post-pandemic cohort (2022). Although both connectedness and involvement remained statistically significant predictors of satisfaction prior to the pandemic, involvement (measured by hours spent on coursework and co- curricular activities) had a marginally stronger influence. This aligns with

established models of student engagement (e.g., Astin, 1984), which emphasize behavioral investment in institutional life.

However, the post-pandemic regression model reveals a paradigm shift: the quality of student-faculty interactions emerged as the strongest predictor of satisfaction. The coefficient for perceived quality of faculty interactions increased markedly (**B = 0.168, p < .001**), while time spent on co-curricular activities lost statistical significance (*B = 0.026, n.s.*). This highlights a shift toward relational variables as key drivers of student satisfaction. The isolation imposed by the pandemic likely intensified the perceived value of faculty interactions, amplifying their salience in students' evaluations of institutional quality.

Further support for this interpretation is found in the increasing importance of faculty behaviors such as mentoring on academic performance and career planning (**B = 0.094, p < .05**), compared to the diminished impact of independent academic effort. For instance, time spent preparing for class had a negative association with satisfaction post-pandemic (**B = -0.054, p < .01**), suggesting that solitary effort may have become psychologically costly in an era marked by diminished social engagement.

This shift aligns with the tenets of Relationship Marketing theory (Morgan & Hunt, 1994), wherein satisfaction is enhanced through perceived trust and relational commitment. Students increasingly view faculty not merely as academic authorities but as institutional partners who shape their collegiate experience. Involvement alone—absent meaningful connection—no longer suffices to drive satisfaction.

Our post-pandemic model, with an **R² of 0.30**, demonstrates that connectedness-related variables account for substantially more variance in student satisfaction than involvement alone. This finding suggests that fostering faculty-student connections may represent a more effective strategy for enhancing satisfaction among Generation Z students than expanding extracurricular offerings.

THEORETICAL AND MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

Strategic Emphasis on Connectedness in Higher Education Marketing and Operations

The post-pandemic higher education environment demands a reassessment of how institutions conceptualize and support student satisfaction. Our findings indicate that institutions should strategically prioritize structured opportunities for faculty-student engagement. This includes, but is not limited to, faculty mentorship programs, integrated academic advising, collaborative research opportunities, and informal faculty touchpoints.

This pivot carries practical implications for faculty hiring, evaluation, and development. Institutions might consider incorporating relational competencies into faculty recruitment and performance metrics, ensuring that interpersonal effectiveness is valued alongside scholarly productivity. Likewise, metrics for student connectedness—such as frequency and quality of faculty interactions—should be systematically tracked and reported alongside traditional measures of student involvement.

From a marketing perspective, these findings suggest that universities should foreground connectedness in messaging to prospective and current students. For Gen Z, connection is not ancillary; it is fundamental. The ability to foster a sense of belonging through faculty engagement may be a key differentiator in competitive recruitment markets.

More broadly, this research contributes to the higher education literature by underscoring the importance of a human-centric approach to student engagement. Satisfaction, a precursor to retention and long-term institutional loyalty, is increasingly predicated on the quality of students' interpersonal experiences rather than the quantity of their activities. Faculty, therefore, should be understood as the institution's core competency and strategic asset.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

This study is not without limitations. First, the reliance on secondary data from the NSSE constrains variable selection and interpretation. The operationalization of "connectedness" and "involvement" reflects NSSE's constructs, which may not fully capture the nuance or depth of students' subjective experiences.

Future research should incorporate primary data collection using tailored instruments that examine the emotional, cognitive, and behavioral dimensions of connectedness.

Second, the study compares only three discrete cohorts—two pre-pandemic and one post-pandemic. While this provides insight into temporal shifts, the limited post-pandemic dataset (collected in Spring 2022) may not fully reflect evolving long-term trends. Follow-up studies with multiple post-pandemic cohorts will be necessary to assess whether the emphasis on faculty connectedness persists over time.

Third, the study was conducted at a single regional university in the Southeastern United States. This geographic and institutional specificity may limit the generalizability of the findings. Future work should replicate this analysis across diverse institutional contexts, including public and private, research-intensive and teaching-focused institutions, and include a more demographically diverse student population.

Moreover, longitudinal studies that track students across multiple years would provide deeper insight into how connectedness influences not only satisfaction but also academic performance, retention, and post-graduation outcomes. Given the increasing prevalence of online and hybrid learning, future research should also examine how virtual modalities affect opportunities for connection and whether digital faculty touchpoints can replicate the relational value of face-to-face engagement.

In conclusion, while this study provides strong evidence that student-faculty connectedness is a key driver of satisfaction, the broader question remains: can institutions systematize relational engagement in a way that is scalable, equitable, and enduring? Addressing this question will be essential as higher education continues to evolve in a post-pandemic world.

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