

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STATUS AND CO-CURRICULAR ENGAGEMENT ON THE UNIVERSITY SATISFACTION OF STUDENTS

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Abstract

As an increasing number of first-generation students attend college, it is important for universities to understand and meaningfully respond to the unique needs of these students in order to ensure that they have the same quality of experience as non-first-generation students. The purpose of this paper is to examine the relationships between first-generation college status, co-curricular involvement and engagement on university satisfaction amongst students. The sample for this study consisted of 204 first- and fourth-year university students who completed an online survey administered as part of the Youth Cultures Study conducted under the auspices of the International Federation of Catholic Universities. Results showed a significant interaction effect between generational status and co-curricular involvement on university satisfaction. Non-first generation students who were involved in co-curricular activities showed significantly higher levels of satisfaction as compared to those who were not involved. The level of satisfaction for first-generation students followed a similar pattern, but those first-generation students who reported no involvement in co-curricular activities showed the lowest level of satisfaction with their university experience as compared to all other students. Additionally, level of university satisfaction increased significantly in a stepwise fashion as level (none, some, high) of co-curricular involvement increased. There were no differences between first-generation students and non-first generation students with regard to overall co-curricular engagement/involvement. However, first-generation students were significantly more engaged in spiritual- and/or service-based activities as compared to non-first-generation students. The findings of this study suggest that first-generation college status is an important factor associated with type of

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co-curricular involvement and university satisfaction. Implications for further research on special programs for first-generation students are discussed.

Keywords: Catholic higher education, co-curricular involvement, campus engagement, university students, first-generation college students, university satisfaction, social awareness, Youth Cultures study, International Federation of Catholic Universities

The Relationship Between First-Generation College Status and Co-Curricular Engagement on the University Satisfaction of Students

In the 21st century, universities are faced with the challenge of offering rigorous academic opportunities to an increasingly diverse population of students. Beyond academics, institutions of higher education, and in particular, mission-driven Catholic universities must also task themselves with creating co-curricular programs in order to support and inspire nascent compassionate and ethical leaders for a multicultural society. As universities enroll and seek to retain an increasing number of students who are underrepresented and disadvantaged, they must also address the special needs of students from a variety of subpopulations, including those who are the first generation to attend college. In keeping with the special theme of “being open to others” of this second issue of *Educa*, Catholic institutions might reflect on how to authentically live out this theme by welcoming multicultural students and creating “truly open” and “liberating” curricula and co-curricular opportunities. How can these universities nurture their students so that they in turn are inspired to be “open” to their own communities— to “others”? This paper will focus on one population of critical importance in a growing multicultural world— first-generation college students.

The core purpose of this paper is to examine the relationships between generational college status and co-curricular engagement on university satisfaction amongst students attending a Catholic university in the western United States. The following questions will be addressed: What factors influence first-generation students’ success? Do first-generation students experience different levels of university satisfaction as compared to non-first generation students? Are first-generation students as involved in co-curricular activities as non-first-generation students? Does university involvement and engagement affect university satisfaction amongst students? Does the type of co-curricular involvement influence these factors?

University Satisfaction

A manner of gauging how well a university is meeting the needs of its students is to examine satisfaction with their overall university experience. Orpen (1990) found that in business students, the factors most greatly associated with satisfaction in their university included high quality of teaching and greater diversity of programs, while the factors that were the least related included support services for students. University satisfaction is a critically important aspect of students' college experience. Pike (1991) has reported correlations between academic performance as measured by grades (grade point average; GPA) and university satisfaction. His research highly suggests that university satisfaction *causes* an increase in GPA, rather than GPA causing university satisfaction. Interestingly, research has suggested that university satisfaction is related to co-curricular involvement, particularly in regards to religious- or spiritually-based engagement (Mooney, 2010).

The Importance of Co-Curricular Involvement in the Success of College Students

The research regarding involvement suggests that there is an understood distinction between extracurricular and co-curricular activities (Mooney, 2010). Co-curricular activities tend to be activities that enhance the academic learning experience for students, such as artistic clubs, academic clubs, or even spiritual- or service-based organizations. Extracurricular activities, on the other hand, tend to refer to involvement in athletic teams, athletic clubs, or intramural sports. For the purpose of this paper, we will describe the activities investigated as co-curricular activities, in congruence with the accepted distinctions between the terms extracurricular and co-curricular.

Involvement in university life is an important aspect of many students' college experience. Involvement in co-curricular activities may come in many forms including participation in: service-oriented organizations, student government, political organizations, religious-based groups, and other related activities. Past research indicates that such involvement is related to other facets of university experience; specifically, co-curricular involvement is frequently tied to positive outcomes amongst college students. Strapp and Farr (2010) found that involvement in psychology-related activities was related to grades (GPA), as well as university satisfaction, in psychology majors. In that particular study, greater involvement in

specifically a major-related activity was associated with higher GPA and higher university satisfaction. Furthermore, these researchers suggest the development of major-relevant leadership and work-related skills as a result of their involvement as a possible explanation.

Additionally, Webber et al. (2013) found a significant relationship between greater engagement in different co-curricular activities, particularly service-related activities, and GPA, as well as university satisfaction. Interestingly, Baker (2008) further explored the topic of involvement, in regards to ethnic minority college students, and found that the type of involvement students engage in was critically important to their overall success. She found that while involvement in some organizations is positive for some types of ethnic minority students, the same type of involvement might have no effect, or even be detrimental, to other minority students' success. As this influence differs based on student race, this finding may suggest that there is no unique type of engagement that is beneficial across the board for all students. Thus, universities should strive to create a variety of programs and engagement opportunities on campus in order to benefit as many students as possible.

First-Generation versus Non- first-generation College Students

For the purpose of our study, first-generation students are defined as, “those whose parents’ highest level of education is a high school diploma or less” (Núñez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998). In cases where parents have different levels of education, the maximum education level of either parent determines how the student is categorized. When examining the factors that may influence university satisfaction in first-generation students, some studies have found that integration and cultural transformation are critically essential in understanding why first-generation students differ from their non-first-generation counterparts (Núñez & Cuccaro- Alamin, 1998). Aside from the academic, economic, work, and familial responsibilities that many college students face, first-generation students face the added stress of having to adapt culturally to academic life, which can ultimately limit their ability to integrate themselves into the college setting. While this outcome is attainable, it comes at a great sacrifice for the first-generation student and their families, especially when first-generation students encounter a conflict between the cultures of their families/friends and their new college. Academic and social integration highly depends on students’ involvement in and adaptation to the institution they are attending.

Mehta, Newbold, and O'Rourke (2011) address the importance of university engagement for first-generation students by examining why first-generation students fail. Financial, work, and familial stresses can result in a less optimal university involvement by first-generation students in co-curricular activities, especially as they struggle to balance and cope with such stresses. While first-generation students experience greater amounts of stress, their ability to cope can be largely influenced by their degree of engagement in co-curricular activities that serve to enrich their college experience and allow them to make connections with their peers. Involvement, ultimately, influences first-generation students' ability to adjust to college life and provides a social transition that benefits academic success and persistence (Mehta, Newbold, and O'Rourke, 2011).

Type of co-curricular involvement is also important to examine in order to more fully understand the overall experience of first-generation students. Easley, Bianco, and Leech (2012) cite the "desire to repay and pay forward" as one of the motivations behind first-generation students' desire to engage in university life and succeed in higher education in general. These findings may suggest that first-generation students might be more motivated to engage in co-curricular engagement opportunities that serve the community and greater good as compared to non-first-generation students.

Hypotheses

Based on the literature reviewed above, we pose the following—

Hypothesis #1: Higher levels of university engagement will be associated with correspondingly higher levels of university satisfaction (Mooney, 2010).

Hypothesis #2: First-generation students who participate in co-curricular activities will show the highest reported university satisfaction as compared to uninvolved first-generation students and both involved and uninvolved non-first-generation students. Yet, we also predict that uninvolved first-generation students will have the lowest university satisfaction as compared to the rest of students.

Hypothesis #3: Lastly, based on research conducted by Easley, Bianco, and Leech (2012), we predict that first-generation students will be more involved in spiritual- and or service-related co-curricular activities as compared to non-first generation students.

These research questions will be tested using institutional data from Loyola Marymount University collected as part of the *Youth Cultures Study*, sponsored by the Centre for

Coordination of Research, an arm of the International Federation of Catholic Universities (2014).

Method

Participants

The participants of this study included 60 males (29.4%) and 144 females (70.6%). Of these 204 students, 108 (52.9%) were first-year undergraduate students, while 95 (46.6%) were fourth-year undergraduate students (one did not identify year in college) between the ages of 18 and 26 ($M = 19.9$, $S. D. = 1.7$). All students were enrolled at Loyola Marymount University (LMU), a private Catholic university in Los Angeles, California. Eighty-five of the participating students participated in the study in the spring of 2012, while 119 participated in the spring of 2013. Of the spring 2012 students, 8% identified as Asian/Pacific Islander, 9% as Black/African American (non-Hispanic), 54% as Caucasian/White, 1% as Native American, 23% as Latino/Hispanic (all races), and 5% as multiracial. Of the spring 2013 students, 15% identified as Asian/Pacific Islander, 7% as Black/African American (non-Hispanic), 49% as Caucasian/White, 1% as Native American, 20% as Latino/Hispanic (all races), and 8% as multiracial. While the sample is consistent with the general LMU population demographics in regards to race/ethnicity, this sample did have a minor overrepresentation of female students.

For the purpose of this study, it is also important to report the number of students indicated by the survey as first-generation students. We decided to adhere to the traditional definition of first-generation student status: neither parent of a first-generation college student has received a degree from a four-year college or university in the United States. If a student has one parent who has a college degree, they are considered to be mixed-generation, not first-generation. Since no question on the survey asked directly whether students self-identified as first-generation or not, we used items inquiring about the education of both parents to classify students as first-generation or not. This process yielded 48 students (23.5%) as first-generation, and 156 (74%) as non-first-generation; 5 (2.5%) did not answer the parent education question. Of those 156 non-first-generation students, 49 (31%) formed part of the mixed-generation group of students, meaning that one of their parents did attain a college degree. For the analyses reported in this study, the 48 students who identified that both parents did not attain a college degree were defined as “first-generation students” and the 156

students who were either mixed generation or non-first-generation were grouped together to form the “non-first-generation” group, in accordance with the literature (Núñez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998). The proportion of first-generation students in this study mirrors the general rate at the University.

Materials and Procedure

The participants of this study volunteered to complete the International Federation of Catholic Universities (IFCU) *Youth Cultures* survey online. The survey consisted of 85 sets of questions belonging to the categories of Personal Data, Parental Background, Personal Activities and Interests, Satisfaction with Life and Self-Esteem, Perception of the World/Politics, Most Important Aspects in Life and Personal Identity, Family and Intergenerational Relations, Significant Others, Friends, Social Networks, Interactions with Others, Partner Relationships, Work, Value Orientation and Ethics, Religion, Confidence in Institutions, University, and The Future. After signing up for the survey, participants were given a link to complete the survey via email. The participants’ responses were all recorded anonymously, and following completion of the survey, responses were kept in a database with password protection.

Degree of co-curricular involvement was determined by examining the sum of involvement in the following groups: (1) sports club or organization; (2) religious group; (3) artistic or cultural group (theatre, music, dance, literature...); (4) volunteer in a non-governmental organization (NGO) working for the poor, sick or other underprivileged groups; (5) student organization; (6) political party/movement; (7) trade union; (8) defense of human rights organizations; (9) feminist organization; (10) ecologist/environmentalist organization; and (11) anti-globalization or anti-system movement. The distribution of degree of involvement is as follows: 10.3% (N=21) not involved at all; 44.1% (N=90) have some involvement in 1 or 2 activities; and 45.6 (N=93) have high involvement in 3 or more activities. A spiritual/service involvement scale was constructed in order to measure participation in co-curriculars based in spiritual- or service-based activities. This scale was created by summing the number of endorsements of: (2) religious group, (4) volunteer in a non-governmental organization (NGO) working for the poor, sick or other underprivileged groups (8) defense of human rights organizations, (9) feminist organization, and (10) ecologist/environmentalist organization.

In order to measure university satisfaction, participants were asked to rate their general satisfaction with different aspects related to their university and their studies on a scale of 1 to 6, 1 being totally dissatisfied and 6 being totally satisfied. The questions asked them to rate their satisfaction in respect to the following statements: 1) with your choice of university; 2) with your choice of degree/studies; 3) with the way classes are imparted; 4) with the professors/lecturers; 5) with the student climate; 6) with the personal attention and help you get from professors/lecturers and other university staff; 7) with the general atmosphere of the university; 8) with the possibilities offered for personal growth; 9) with the possibilities offered for other academic activities beside those connected to your degree; 10) with the possibilities for deepening my religious knowledge and experience; and 11) with the possibilities offered to pursue my own specific interests. The university satisfaction scale was created by summing the responses to these eleven items. The internal validity of this university satisfaction scale was evaluated by performing a Chronbach's Alpha test, which yielded a score of 0.91 indicating a highly reliable and internally consistent scale.

Results

Hypothesis #1: Involvement and University Satisfaction

A one-way ANOVA was used to test the independent variable of co-curricular involvement on the dependent variable of university satisfaction. A significant main effect for co-curricular involvement on university satisfaction, $F(1, 193) = 10.43, p < 0.0001$, was found indicating that students who were more involved were significantly more satisfied with their overall university experience. Post-hoc analyses using a Bonferroni correction revealed that students who had some (1 or 2 activities) co-curricular involvement ($M = 50.56$) were significantly more satisfied than students who were not (0 activities) involved ($M = 42.94$), $p = 0.001$. Furthermore, students who had high (3 or more activities) co-curricular involvement ($M = 53.26$) were significantly more satisfied than students who had no co-curricular involvement ($M = 42.94$), $p < 0.0001$. Lastly, students who had high co-curricular involvement ($M = 53.26$) were significantly more satisfied than those who just had some co-curricular involvement ($M = 50.56$), $p = 0.035$. These results are shown in *Figure 1*. Overall, the significance of these results emphasizes the importance of co-curricular involvement, specifically, levels of such involvement, on university satisfaction.

Hypothesis #2: First-Generation Students and Involvement

In a similar effort of understanding the factors influencing university satisfaction, we analyzed the effects of the independent variables of generational status and co-curricular involvement on the dependent variable of university satisfaction, using a two-way ANOVA. For the purpose of this test, we combined the values of some (1 or 2) and high (3+) involvement into one category of “yes involved” in order to increase the power of the analyses. Results from this two-way analysis of variance revealed a statistically significant interaction, $F(1, 189) = 5.80, p = 0.017$. Non-first-generation students who were involved ($M = 51.58$) in co-curricular activities showed significantly higher levels of university satisfaction as compared to those who were not involved ($M = 46$). The level of satisfaction for first-generation students followed a similar pattern, but those first-generation students who reported no involvement ($M = 36.2$) in co-curricular activities showed the lowest level of satisfaction with their university experience as compared to other first-generation students who were involved ($M = 53.2$). These results are shown in *Figure 2*. There was a non-significant trend for first-generation students ($M = 51.31$) to report higher university satisfaction as compared to non-first-generation students ($M = 51.17$) but the main effect for generational status did not reach statistical significance, $F(1, 189) = 2.98, p = 0.086$. However, results did show a significant main effect for university involvement $F(1, 189) = 22.70, p < 0.0001$, such that students who were involved ($M = 51.95$) in co-curricular activities were significantly more satisfied than those who were not involved ($M = 42.94$).

Hypothesis #3: First-Generation Students and Types of Involvement

Two analyses of variance were conducted to test the relationship between first-generation student status and type of involvement — separately for general or total co-curricular involvement and spiritual- and/or service-based co-curricular involvement. The first one-way ANOVA testing the relationship between first-generation student status and general co-curricular involvement did not yield any significant results $F(1, 197) = 0.45, p < 0.50$ indicating that first-gen students ($M = 2.67$) did not significantly differ from non-first gen students ($M = 2.48$) on total (general) involvement. These results are shown in *Figure 3*. However, the second one-way ANOVA tested the relationship between generational status and spiritual- and/or service-based involvement, which yielded a significant main effect for generational status, $F(1, 197) = 3.79, p = 0.05$, such that first generation students were more involved in spiritual- and/or service-related co-curricular activities ($M = 1.25$) than non-first

generation students ($M = 0.90$). These results are shown in *Figure 4*. The pattern of these overall results suggest that while first-generation students do not differ from non-first generation students in terms of general or total co-curricular involvement, they exhibit a greater tendency to engage in a significantly higher degree of spiritual- and/or service-based co-curricular involvement.

Discussion

Findings

When examining the effect of co-curricular involvement on university satisfaction, students reporting some/high involvement tended to be significantly more satisfied than those with no involvement, and those with high involvement tended to be significantly more satisfied than those with some/low involvement. These results are consistent with findings in the literature that there is a positive relationship between involvement and university satisfaction (Mooney, 2010).

The results of our study indicate that there is a significant interaction between co-curricular involvement and generational status on the university satisfaction of college students. Both first-generation and non-first-generation students who reported being involved in one or more co-curricular activity were significantly more satisfied with their university as compared to those reporting no involvement. Additionally, first-generation students who were involved held the highest mean in university satisfaction as opposed to all other groups (non-first-generation and involved, first-generation and not involved, and non-first-generation and not involved). Also, first-generation students who reported no involvement in co-curricular activities were significantly less satisfied with their university experience as compared to all other first-generation and non-first-generation students. These results point to the importance of co-curricular involvement for first-generation students.

Results also showed that first-generation students were significantly more involved in spiritual-and/or service-based co-curricular activities as compared to non-first-generation students. (The groups did not differ in terms of general or total co-curricular involvement.) These findings are interpreted as first-generation students' "desire to repay and pay forward" as one of the driving motives to engage in university life and connect with underserved communities, in some cases, their very own communities (Easley et al., 2012). We posit that

engagement in spiritual- and service-based co-curriculars can impact the lives of first-generation students by fulfilling their need to engage socially, and perhaps even adding meaning to their lives.

These findings as a whole build on previous work from our research lab showing that student involvement in service/religious oriented groups is significantly related to an increased sense of social awareness and ethical and pro-social behavior (Machón, Cullen, Kreisel, Roxas & González, 2014). We previously reported that for those involved in service/religious service, growth occurred from first to fourth year in university students. This growth is shown in the expression of increased social awareness, concern for social equality, and in the priority that dedication of their lives to real and meaningful social action has when considering future plans. This work supports the important role that a values-driven higher education plays in the formation of “whole students” inspired to contribute to the improvement of social inequality and fragmentation.

Limitations and Implications for Further Research

There are a few limitations of our study to acknowledge. First, the nature of the survey is correlational, thus making statements about causality and directionality tentative. For example, it could be the case that higher university satisfaction leads to higher co-curricular involvement and not the other way around. Secondly, the survey included no specific questions regarding “first-generation college status” *per se*. Existing items on highest level of education of participants’ parents were therefor used to classify students as first gen or not. Further research on this subject area should control for the first-generation variable more accurately, explicitly asking students if they identify as first-generation students or not. Furthermore, about 30% of our non-first-generation sample consisted of students who were “mixed-generation”, meaning one of their parents received a college degree and the other did not. However, we did adhere to how these students are typically classified in the literature, as non-first generation (Núñez & Cuccaro-Alamin, 1998). Future studies should consider the implications of being a mixed-generation student, and control for that variable more accurately.

Additionally, this study was cross-sectional, as two different groups of first- and fourth- year students were surveyed. Ideally, the same group would have taken the survey during their

first and fourth years, in order to more accurately follow trends regarding involvement and university satisfaction in students. Yet, while there was a slight overrepresentation of females in the sample of our study as compared to the student population, the sample appears to be generally representative of the student population in regards to race/ethnicity and age.

Conclusions

The findings of this study suggest that there is indeed a relationship between university satisfaction, co-curricular involvement, and first-generation student status. As predicted, the unique backgrounds of students do coincide with various levels of university satisfaction, as well as co-curricular involvement. Keeping these findings in mind, it is important for both universities and students to be aware of the relationship that exists between spiritual- and/or service-based involvement and university satisfaction. This positive relationship suggests that Catholic universities in particular should continue to offer varied spiritual- and/or service-based activities in which students may become involved, as this study indicates that these particular co-curriculars have the strongest relationship with university satisfaction, which, in turn, has a relationship with other positive outcomes in students, such as grades (Pike, 1991). Additionally, the relationship between first-generation students and university involvement/engagement should also be noted. The dramatic difference in university satisfaction between involved first-generation students and uninvolved first-generation students is highly noteworthy, and suggests that these students may benefit to a greater degree from involvement in spiritual- and/or service-based co-curriculars on campus. Further research can seek to expand upon this relationship between first-generation status and involvement, and study whether “first-to-go” programs specifically designed for this population are effective for first-generation students.

As Catholic universities, in living out their mission, become more “open” to an increasingly diverse student population, they must remain focused on creating rigorous academic programs as well as meaningful co-curricular experiences that prepare students for a “more open” and tolerant society. This represents our greatest challenge, our greatest inspiration and our most noble mission— as institutions for higher education and institutions for a “higher purpose”.

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Figures

Figure 1. Co-curricular Involvement and University Satisfaction

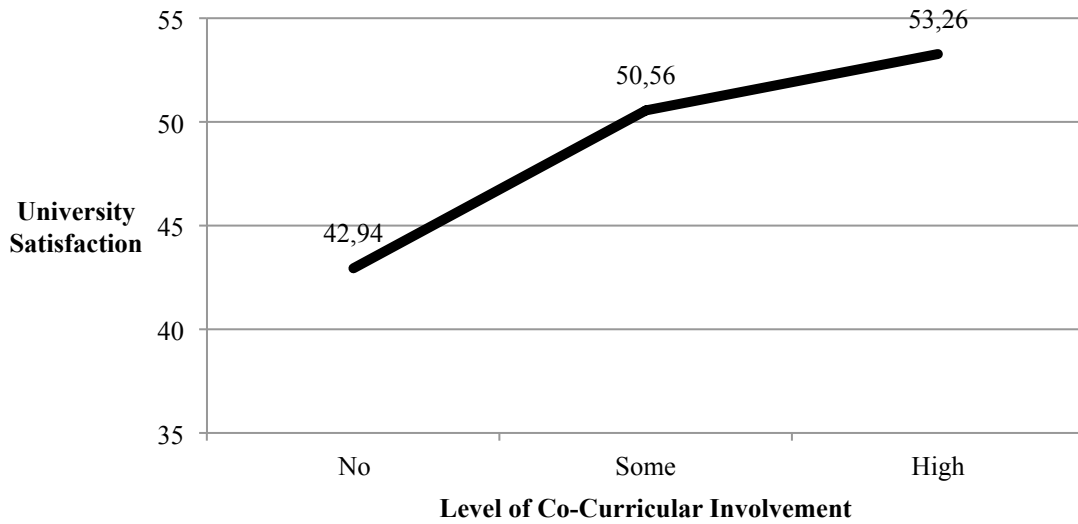


Figure 2. Involvement, First-Generation Student Status, and University Satisfaction

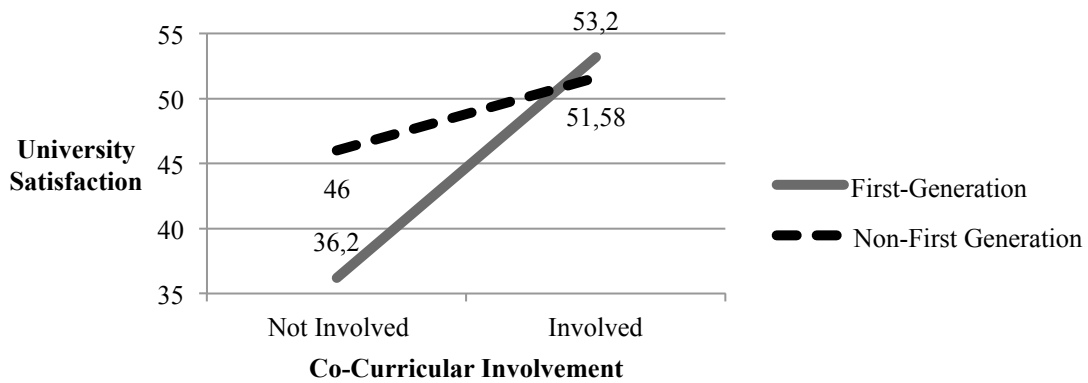


Figure 3. Co-Curricular Involvement and Generational Status

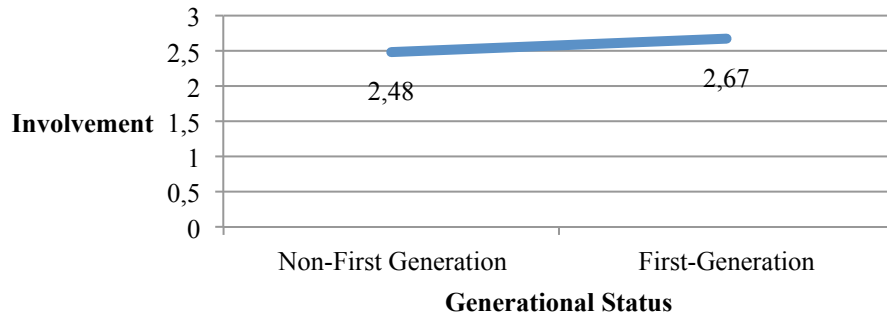


Figure 4. Spiritual/Service Co-Curricular Involvement and Generational Status

