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Increasing Students' Familiarity With Cocurricular Experiences: A Pilot Trial

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The transition from high school to college presents critical but predictable developmental challenges such as making new social connections and identifying social/leisure activities (Thurber & Walton, 2012; Tinto, 1993, 2007). Co-curricular experiences that create opportunities for students to become engaged on and off campus are particularly efficacious in helping students navigate these developmental challenges; such experiences contribute to students' well-being, supportive relationships, sense of belonging, positive self-concept, leadership skills, and persistence (Astin, 1984; Busseri & Rose-Krasnor, 2008; Moore, Lovell, McGann, & Wyrick, 1998; Terenzini, Pascarella, & Blimling, 1999). Web-based social media networks (SMNs) are one avenue used by students to seek co-curricular activities and social interactions that are valuable for college adjustment (DeAndrea, Ellison, LaRose, Steinfield, & Fiore, 2011; Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Leung, & Lee, 2005). Thus, the current project aimed to increase students' familiarity with co-curricular experiences via a program enabled by an innovative SMN.

Methodology from design-based research was used in developing the program described here, *Live It*. Design-based research involves the creation of a program within the context that it will serve (Anderson & Shattuck, 2012; Brown, 1992). *Live It* was developed in collaboration with a northeastern university's Residential Life office, accounting for both the evidence base on college student engagement and the practical constraints presented by the context. Design-based research also is iterative, meaning that multiple versions of a program are implemented consecutively. Research is performed in tandem with these iterations to inform and improve successive iterations (Barab & Squire, 2004). Here, we provide a description of one program iteration and discuss future directions for consequent program iterations and research. Design-based research was an appropriate framework for the *Live It* program because it is typically used for innovative, interventionist research (Cobb, Confrey, diSessa, Lehrer, & Schauble, 2003). Finally, design-based research is often used in cases

where theory is still being developed or changed (Cobb et al., 2003); we offer theoretical insights about students' familiarity with co-curricular experiences in the discussion.

The *Live It* website displays co-curricular experiences on and near campus, such as volunteer opportunities, restaurants, hiking trails, and art classes. A total of 19 experiences were included during the current project based on the following criteria: 1) selected or endorsed by current students, 2) experience-based, not product-based, and 3) facilitated physical or mental health, sense of belonging, or personal relationships. Experiences were curated, meaning that the catalog of experiences contained a variety of types of information on how to have the experience: directions, cost, transportation, ideal group size, and general advice. The *Live It* program includes access to this website as well as an accompanying \$50 gift card that may be used at any of *Live It's* curated experiences that required monetary exchange. The gift card was provided by the university's Alumni Association and removed any financial barriers to participation. The *Live It* program also included invitations to 8 total events at *Live It* experiences hosted by *Live It* staff. Students could attend *Live It* experiences at any time, and could browse *Live It* experiences online, but only *Live It* events were specifically advertised via email, the *Live It* website, and posters in the residence halls. This first iteration was implemented with a group of summer students living on two floors of a residence hall over five weeks.

Given that students had access to information about co-curricular experiences on the *Live It* website and could only spend their gift card for those experiences, we hypothesized that the *Live It* program would provide students with information about new co-curricular experiences. This information may be particularly valuable for first-year students who are beginning to acquaint themselves with the campus and surrounding areas. Familiarity with co-curricular experiences is important because students need to be familiar with a new experience to complete it. Thus, aim one of the study was to compare the number of experiences about which students learned via the *Live It* program to the number of experiences with which students were familiar without the *Live It* program, using a comparison group of students who did not receive the *Live It* program.

One way in which students may become familiar with new experiences is through social contagion, a mechanism by which information, ideas, and motivation to participate in a behavior are transferred from person to person (Aaker & Smith, 2010). Social contagion may contribute to volunteerism among college students (Hustinx, Vanhove, Declercq, Hermans, & Lammertyn, 2005), health behaviors (Christakis & Fowler, 2013), and the purchase of new products (Iyengar, Van den Bulte, & Valente, 2011). We hypothesized that students might learn about experiences via social contagion, resulting in more students engaging in *Live It* experiences after centrally planned *Live It* events. Thus, aim two of the study was to assess social contagion of co-curricular experiences between students.

METHOD

Participants

The sample was comprised of 244 first-year college students who lived on four floors of a residence hall during the university's summer session. These students were considered to be

at higher risk for transition problems because for academic reasons they were required to begin in the summer, but did not participate in a university program specifically designed to support the college transitional challenges. Two floors of students were the program group ($n = 120$), and two floors of students were the comparison group ($n = 124$). The floors were chosen by Residence Life based on each floor's Resident Assistants' willingness to participate. Everyone on the program floors received a *Live It* card and thus were technically in the program. However, attendance at all *Live It* events and participation in surveys were optional.

The study was approved by the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB). Residence Life provided email addresses for all students. Online surveys were emailed to students, with multiple reminders, using Qualtrics survey software. The post-test survey was sent several days after the end of the program. Although all students received a *Live It* card and were invited to take part in the program, only students who were 18 and over could consent to be surveyed. Thus, the analytic sample ($n = 100$) is based only on a subset of students; other students did not consent to the survey ($n = 144$). Here, we use "students" to describe all students in the program, and "participants" to describe students in the program who completed a survey. Forty participants were from the program group and 60 were from the comparison group. Participants were 51.8% male, 85.3% White/European American, 28.1% Asian/Asian American, 3.8% Black/African American, and 1.2% Hispanic/Latino; participants could select multiple racial/ethnic categories. In regard to socioeconomic status, 85.5% of participants had at least one parent who had completed college, and 7.2% had received federal PELL grants. With regard to first-generation college student status, only 14.5% were the first person in their family to go to college. Participants received a \$15 gift card for filling out the survey.

Measures

Familiarity with Experiences—For each *Live It* experience, participants in the program group responded to the prompt, "I became familiar with this experience through *Live It*." The purpose of this method of measurement was to identify how many experiences were introduced to participants via *Live It*. Also for each *Live It* experience, participants in the comparison group responded to the prompt, "I am familiar with this experience." We created an aggregate variable representing the number of experiences with which participants first became familiar through *Live It* (program group) or with which they were already familiar (comparison group). Thus, we were able to compare the average number of new experiences introduced to participants via *Live It* to the average number of experiences with which students were familiar without *Live It*.

Social Contagion of Experiences—Social contagion of *Live It* experiences was assessed via behavioral data on students' experiences. When students used their *Live It* cards for purchases, we tracked the date, location, and amount spent. Cumulative purchases at four experiences near campus were summed for each week, for five weeks. Note that unlike survey data, data from the *Live It* cards were not subject to IRB approval, and thus all students, including students under 18, could contribute to the social contagion data.

Qualitative Data—Most design-based research studies rely and report on rich qualitative data (Anderson & Shattuck, 2012). Thus, to gain a deeper understanding of the *Live It* events and experiences, the first author held weekly meetings with the *Live It* staff who were in charge of implementing *Live It* events. At these meetings, *Live It* staff shared spontaneous quotes from students about *Live It* events or experiences. One such quote supported the results regarding social contagion, and thus is shared below to illuminate these results.

RESULTS

Familiarity with Experiences

We found that, on average, the comparison group was familiar with an average of three *Live It* experiences (16.8% of the experiences). In contrast, the program group became familiar with an average of six *Live It* experiences (33% of the experiences) for the first time via *Live It*. The difference in these percentages is statistically significant ($t = 3.66, p < .001$).

Social Contagion

We found evidence for positive social contagion of the *Live It* experiences such as pottery painting and bowling. Students attended experiences in small groups (always six or less). Although the planned events were attended in small numbers, other students visited these experiences in the following weeks. For example, only five people, including two *Live It* staff members, went to the *Live It* Pottery Painting event. However, additional students went to Pottery Painting in each of the following weeks. Students indicated a desire to tell others about the experience; for example, one *Live It* staff member stated, “When we went to {Pottery Painting} the girls we went with all talked about coming back with their other friends... and that they wanted to come back before Christmas to make presents for their parents.” In the weeks following the events hosted by *Live It* staff, students overwhelmingly favored experiences in which staff had hosted events; there were 106 purchases during the pilot trial, only 6 of which occurred at experiences for which there was no original *Live It* event.

DISCUSSION

The current project used design-based research to develop a program to increase students’ familiarity with co-curricular experiences. Such experiences may facilitate the challenges associated with the transition from high school to college (Thurber & Walton, 2012; Tinto, 1993, 2007). This program was enabled by a new social media network (SMN) because students use such technologies to seek co-curricular activities and social interactions that are valuable for college adjustment (DeAndrea et al., 2011; Ellison et al., 2007; Leung & Lee, 2005). We used design-based research, which is an appropriate framework because the current project was innovative and included an intervention (Cobb et al., 2003). Further, there has been little research to date on the ways in which students learn about co-curricular experiences. Design-based research allows researchers to reflect back on theory after implementation (Cobb et al., 2003).

The comparison group was only familiar with an average of three *Live It* experiences. The program group discovered an average of six of *Live It* experiences for the first time during

their exposure to the *Live It* program. We can infer that the *Live It* program increased students' familiarity with co-curricular experiences. Thus, *Live It* may be an efficacious program for spreading information about co-curricular events and experiences at higher education institutions (aim two). Theoretically, a SMN-enabled intervention may help students become familiar with university-sanctioned co-curricular experiences in their new environment more quickly and seamlessly.

Although attendance at *Live It*'s planned events was low, students continued to visit the experiences where *Live It* staff members held events. Additionally, on very few occasions did students visit experiences where *Live It* staff did not hold planned events. This phenomenon may have stemmed from social contagion of experiences caused by *Live It* events; students who attended the event told other students, who then went and engaged in the experience themselves. Therefore, *Live It*'s planned events reached a larger number of students than those who attended the events, via social contagion of experiences (aim two). Theoretically, social contagion may be a powerful way for students to learn about university-sanctioned co-curricular experiences on and off campus. These conclusions are congruent with research showing that social contagion is a powerful method of spreading behaviors (Aaker & Smith, 2010; Christakis & Fowler, 2013; Iyengar et al., 2011).

Future Research

Design-based research is iterative in nature (Barab & Squire, 2004). The current study was designed to assess one iteration. Results indicate many areas of future research. First, based on our conclusion that students may become familiar with experiences via social contagion, future iterations of *Live It* will facilitate social contagion of experiences via online photo sharing of experiences, ability to send experience suggestions, and public reviews of experiences. Second, we speculate that increased familiarity with experiences will increase students' uptake of such experiences, and thus students will receive the benefits of the types of co-curricular experiences cited in the literature. However, a limitation of the current study is that we did not include such potential outcomes. Future iterations of *Live It* will expand on the current study by including outcomes such as well-being, supportive relationships, sense of belonging, positive self-concept, leadership skills, and persistence (Astin, 1984; Busseri & Rose-Krasnor, 2008; Moore et al., 1998; Terenzini et al., 1999). Third, participant data from the *Live It* card, unlike the survey data, may have included participants under 18. Additionally, survey data were not linked to *Live It* card data. Future research on the *Live It* program will consist of more rigorous evaluations that include all participants and link survey data to *Live It* card purchases. Fourth, disparities in college adjustment are revealed according to student race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and first-generation student status (Fischer, 2007; Pike & Kuh, 2005). Future evaluations of the *Live It* program will examine its effectiveness for various groups, particularly those at high risk for poor engagement and adjustment. Fifth, we advertised *Live It* events through the *Live It* website, email, and posters in the residence halls. To discern the relative importance of each of these methods, future research should compare uptake of experiences when each of these methods is used separately.

Conclusions and Implications

Several insights from the current pilot study should be considered by student affairs professionals. First, SMNs and SMNs-enabled programs are ways to increase students' familiarity with co-curricular experiences. Second, student affairs professionals should encourage social contagion of experiences in order to increase students' participation in such experiences. Third, although not our primary aim, we found that students engage in experiences in relatively small groups. This finding is important in light of the amount of money, time, and energy invested by student affairs professionals in implementing co-curricular events. Consideration should be given to facilitating events and experiences that cater to asynchronous attendance in small groups, rather than aiming for large-scale attendance. In conclusion, *Live It* may be an efficacious tool for universities seeking to facilitate students' co-curricular engagement in the interest of supporting the transition to college.

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