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From Activity Participation to Student Development: An Engagement–Learning–Assessment Framework for the Second Classroom in Chinese Private Undergraduate Universities

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Abstract: The "second classroom" has become an increasingly visible and institutionalized component of undergraduate education in China, encompassing a wide range of co-curricular and extracurricular activities such as student organizations, social practice initiatives, volunteer service programs, campus cultural events, innovation and entrepreneurship projects, and academic and skills-based competitions. Despite this growing prominence, student participation in these activities is still predominantly documented through quantitative metrics such as attendance records, accumulated hours, credit points, certificates, and publicity-oriented outputs, with limited attention paid to the actual developmental outcomes experienced by students. This paper addresses this critical gap by adopting a student-development perspective to examine how second-classroom engagement can be meaningfully assessed and enhanced. Drawing on policy analysis, a comprehensive review of higher-education literature, and recurring management situations observed in student-affairs practice at a private undergraduate university in Chongqing, China, this study proposes an Engagement–Learning–Assessment framework. The framework is structured around three core questions: whether students are placed in meaningful and developmentally appropriate roles, what knowledge and competencies they acquire through those roles, and what forms of evidence can reasonably demonstrate developmental growth. The framework is then applied to discuss key dimensions including role progression, cross-activity linkages, collaboration between academic and student-affairs units, and the systematic documentation of second-classroom records. The overarching aim is to provide a practical and theoretically grounded approach for private undergraduate universities to transition from mere activity accumulation toward more robust and intentional developmental support for students.

Keywords: second classroom; student development; co-curricular education; private universities; assessment

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1. Introduction

Learning beyond formal courses is an integral component of undergraduate education and student development [1]. Within Chinese universities, student organizations, volunteer service initiatives, social practice programs, campus cultural activities, and innovation and entrepreneurship competitions collectively constitute a rich ecosystem of experiential learning opportunities. These settings deliberately place students in authentic, often complex situations that require sustained cooperation, purposeful communication, ethical judgment, and personal accountability. For universities with an application-oriented mission—particularly those emphasizing professional competence, practical adaptability, and societal responsiveness—such experiences are not merely supplementary but fundamentally pedagogical. They create structured environments where students actively apply, test, refine, and integrate

disciplinary knowledge and transferable competencies, moving beyond passive reception toward active construction of meaning and capability.

Contemporary educational policy frameworks affirm the strategic importance of holistic development and integrated learning pathways. China's 2024–2035 national education plan emphasizes differentiated development, well-rounded student growth, and evaluation approaches that better reflect educational quality and developmental progress [2]. At the institutional level, higher-education scholarship likewise argues for closer integration of curricular and co-curricular learning so that the student experience is treated as an educational whole rather than as separate academic and extracurricular domains [6].

A persistent practical challenge lies in bridging the gap between student participation and demonstrable developmental outcomes [3]. A university may maintain meticulous records of activity enrollment, duration, and credit allocation while remaining unable to discern the depth of a student's engagement, the nature and quality of reflective processing following an experience, or the extent to which insights from one context inform subsequent learning in another. Administrative metrics such as attendance logs, hour tallies, and credit accumulation serve important operational functions but, in isolation, provide minimal insight into higher-order developmental indicators—including ethical responsibility, metacognitive awareness, constructive self-reflection, timely and actionable feedback uptake, or the capacity to transfer learning across contexts and disciplines.

This concern resonates strongly with foundational theories in student development and higher education effectiveness. Empirical research indicates that developmental gains are associated not simply with the amount of participation, but with the quality and educational purpose of student engagement. Research on first-year college students, for example, has linked participation in educationally purposeful activities with academic achievement and persistence [4]. Long-term syntheses of college impact similarly show that the value of an experience depends on its structure, pedagogical framing, and surrounding support [3]. More broadly, developmental research also underscores the importance of interaction quality, autonomy support, and relevant learning settings in promoting growth [5]. Consequently, attention should move beyond counting activity exposure toward examining the qualitative dimensions of engagement, learning processes, and credible evidence of development.

Against this conceptual and practical backdrop, this paper advances a process-oriented approach to managing the second classroom within Chinese private undergraduate institutions. Rather than treating co-curricular offerings as discrete, catalogued events, the study proposes an Engagement–Learning–Assessment (ELA) framework designed to make developmental progression explicit, traceable, and educationally coherent. The framework systematically links three interdependent domains: first, the nature and level of student engagement—including motivation, agency, collaboration patterns, and contextual responsiveness; second, the learning that emerges through deliberate reflection, conceptual integration, skill refinement, and identity formation; and third, the diverse forms of authentic evidence—such as reflective portfolios, peer and mentor evaluations, project artifacts, and longitudinal self-assessments—that can substantiate claims about developmental growth. In this sense, ELA translates established ideas about student involvement and college impact into a practical structure for student-affairs review [1,3].

2. Context and Analytical Approach

This conceptual, practice-informed study draws on national educational policy, established scholarship on higher-education development, and recurring management situations observed in student-affairs practice at a private undergraduate institution in Chongqing between 2023 and 2026. These situations are used as contextual illustrations rather than as a formal longitudinal dataset. No primary data collection methods—including surveys, interviews, focus groups, or individual-level statistical reporting—

were employed. The analysis is informed by recurring operational situations and pedagogical reflections from professional practice, with illustrative details generalized and de-identified where necessary. This approach keeps the claims within the boundaries of a conceptual and practice-informed study while protecting confidentiality.

In this paper, the term 'second classroom' denotes a structured domain of educational activity that operates outside the formal credit-bearing curriculum but remains connected to the broader developmental aims of undergraduate education. It encompasses student-led organizations, guided social practice initiatives, community-oriented volunteer service, campus cultural programming, innovation-driven project work, and discipline-specific academic competitions. In many Chinese institutions, participation in these activities may be formally recorded or recognized through institutional systems. More broadly, this approach is consistent with the co-curricular principle that learning and development occur across the whole student experience and require coordination beyond the formal classroom [6].

Contemporary higher-education scholarship increasingly emphasizes the need to connect student-support activities with broader institutional learning goals. Campus-wide approaches to student learning call for academic and student-affairs functions to contribute to a coherent student experience [6], while research on educationally effective colleges highlights the importance of clear pathways, supportive environments, and shared responsibility for student success [7]. Together, these perspectives shift attention away from fragmented activity management toward sustained institutional support for student learning and personal growth. For private undergraduate universities, this orientation is particularly useful because it focuses on improving the educational value of existing programs rather than assuming that quality depends on adding more activities.

For private undergraduate universities, efficient resource utilization constitutes a critical dimension of sustainable educational improvement. Given constraints such as relatively small student-affairs teams, competing institutional priorities, and finite operational budgets, maximizing the pedagogical impact of existing programs often represents a more viable and scalable strategy than expanding program portfolios without corresponding enhancements in design, facilitation, or assessment. This entails intentional curriculum mapping between formal coursework and second-classroom experiences, faculty-staff collaboration in learning outcome alignment, and iterative refinement of activity structures based on reflective practice and stakeholder feedback. By deepening the educational substance of current offerings—rather than merely increasing their quantity—institutions can foster more meaningful student development while maintaining operational feasibility and institutional coherence.

3. Three Gaps in Second-Classroom Practice

3.1. Recorded Participation and Meaningful Engagement

The first gap lies between quantitatively recorded participation—such as sign-in sheets, time logs, or attendance records—and the qualitative depth of meaningful engagement. Two students may be awarded identical activity credits despite exhibiting markedly divergent levels of intellectual investment, responsibility, and agency. For instance, one student might actively co-design the project framework, negotiate objectives with external stakeholders, iteratively refine implementation strategies, synthesize interdisciplinary inputs, and lead the dissemination of outcomes; whereas another may fulfill only a peripheral function—such as distributing materials, transcribing notes, or attending scheduled meetings without contributing substantively to decision-making or conceptual development [1,4]. This disparity reflects a systemic limitation in how experiential learning is currently assessed: metrics focused on presence rather than cognitive, affective, and behavioral involvement fail to capture developmental progression.

Such administrative proxies—including accumulated hours, standardized credit units, formal certificates, and nominal roster entries—are operationally convenient and

externally verifiable, yet they remain fundamentally inadequate for evaluating ownership of learning processes. They obscure variations in initiative, critical reflection, problem-solving autonomy, and collaborative leadership [1,4]. A robust understanding of educational impact requires moving beyond surface-level compliance toward evidence of sustained intellectual effort, adaptive reasoning, and self-directed contribution. It has been widely recognized in higher education research that deep learning emerges not from passive exposure but from sustained, purposeful involvement where learners assume increasing responsibility for goals, methods, and evaluation criteria.

This pattern recurs across student-led initiatives, including academic societies, volunteer collectives, and innovation incubators. While role differentiation based on experience is pragmatically necessary for operational continuity, structural rigidity can inadvertently reinforce inequitable access to high-impact learning opportunities. When leadership responsibilities consistently accrue to the same cohort—often early-identified or socially connected members—developmental mobility stagnates for others. A pedagogically sound second classroom must therefore embed intentional scaffolding: rotational leadership models, tiered task design, reflective debriefing protocols, and formative feedback loops that explicitly support incremental advancement from observational participation toward strategic co-creation and independent initiative [1,4].

3.2. Abundant Activities and Fragmented Learning

The second gap centers on the lack of continuity and coherence across students' co-curricular experiences. Although institutions typically offer a wide array of extracurricular and social-practice opportunities—such as volunteer service, student club participation, community-based fieldwork, and innovation or entrepreneurship competitions—these activities are frequently designed and implemented in isolation. As a result, students often perceive them as discrete, self-contained events rather than interconnected components of a unified developmental journey. Each activity may yield valuable competencies—leadership, teamwork, problem-solving, or civic awareness—but their pedagogical impact multiplies significantly when knowledge, skills, and reflective insights gained in one context are intentionally transferred, adapted, and deepened in subsequent contexts. For instance, analytical frameworks developed during a campus sustainability initiative can inform data collection strategies in a later rural education outreach program; similarly, communication techniques honed in debate club settings may enhance effectiveness in organizing peer-led mental health workshops [7].

Research on high-impact educational practices underscores that meaningful learning arises not from episodic involvement but from sustained engagement, iterative reflection, structured feedback, and real-world application over time. When co-curricular experiences are deliberately sequenced—where earlier projects generate questions or challenges that become focal points for later inquiry—they foster integrative thinking and metacognitive growth. A community needs assessment conducted during a summer social-practice program might evolve into a capstone research thesis examining systemic barriers to public health access; conversely, facilitation experience gained while managing a student-run tutoring collective could directly strengthen leadership capacity in coordinating a university-wide disaster relief volunteer network. Recognizing and scaffolding such interconnections transforms the 'second classroom' from a fragmented schedule of optional events into a purposefully layered, longitudinal learning ecosystem grounded in experiential continuity and cumulative skill development [3,7].

Moreover, fragmentation imposes significant inefficiencies on institutional resources: each standalone activity demands redundant administrative overhead—including participant recruitment, faculty mentorship allocation, logistical coordination, formative guidance, and summative evaluation—while failing to leverage prior investments in student development. When outcomes from earlier engagements remain unrecorded, unanalyzed, or uncaptured in academic advising systems, institutions forfeit opportunities to personalize pathways, identify emerging strengths, or calibrate support mechanisms. This siloed approach also limits scalability and sustainability, as best

practices and lessons learned rarely cross program boundaries [7,9]. Systemic integration—through shared learning objectives, cross-program reflection prompts, longitudinal e-portfolios, or faculty-staff coordination councils—can substantially reduce duplication, amplify learning returns, and align co-curricular offerings with broader institutional missions of holistic student formation and societal contribution.

3.3. Extensive Records and Weak Evidence of Learning

The third critical gap pertains to the instrumentalization of records within educational documentation systems. While digital platforms are highly capable of logging quantitative descriptors—such as activity categories, chronological duration, organizational roles, and formal recognitions—these entries remain fundamentally descriptive rather than evidentiary. Their pedagogical significance is contingent upon whether they meaningfully reflect cognitive engagement, skill development, reflective practice, or authentic contribution. Without intentional design that links data collection to learning outcomes, such records risk becoming administrative artifacts devoid of substantive educational insight. In particular, raw metrics like attendance timestamps or position titles fail to convey depth of involvement, quality of reflection, complexity of problem-solving, or growth in interpersonal or ethical reasoning [8]. Consequently, institutions may accumulate voluminous archives while remaining epistemically under-resourced when making formative or summative judgments about student learning.

A robust assessment framework emphasizes alignment between intended learning outcomes and the nature of evidence gathered. This principle requires that evaluation criteria be purposefully differentiated across distinct types of experiential learning. For instance, social practice activities should foreground competencies such as contextualized inquiry, ethical responsiveness in community settings, collaborative communication across diverse stakeholders, and adaptive decision-making amid real-world constraints. In contrast, volunteer service initiatives ought to prioritize demonstrated accountability, sustained relational commitment, and empathetic civic awareness. Similarly, innovation competitions demand rigorous evidence of iterative design thinking, technical application, critical evaluation of prototypes, and responsiveness to feedback. Uniform metrics applied across these varied domains inevitably flatten pedagogical nuance and obscure domain-specific developmental trajectories [8].

When all second-classroom experiences are reduced to interchangeable units—whether standardized hours, generic credit points, or undifferentiated participation badges—the institution forfeits its capacity to discern superficial compliance from deep, transformative engagement. Attendance logs cannot substitute for documented evidence of leadership initiative, reflective synthesis, or measurable impact on a community partner. The core challenge lies not in data scarcity but in data thinness: current recording practices often capture only surface-level proxies rather than rich, multi-dimensional indicators of learning. To support credible developmental assessment, institutions must shift from passive accumulation to active curation—embedding structured reflection prompts, peer and mentor feedback loops, artifact portfolios, and rubric-guided self-assessment into the documentation process itself. This shift from simple accumulation toward purpose-aligned evidence is consistent with established approaches to higher-education assessment [8].

4. The Engagement–Learning–Assessment Framework

The Engagement–Learning–Assessment (ELA) framework functions as a conceptual lens for pedagogical design and reflection, rather than a prescriptive evaluation metric. It intentionally foregrounds three interdependent dimensions: the nature and depth of student engagement in an activity, the substantive knowledge, skills, or dispositions acquired through that engagement, and the rigor and authenticity of the evidence generated to document learning outcomes. Although these dimensions are inherently iterative and co-occurring in real-world educational settings—where reflection may spark new engagement or assessment data may reshape learning goals—the analytical

separation of these elements serves a diagnostic purpose. This temporary distinction enables educators to identify specific points of misalignment, such as high participation without meaningful cognitive processing, or robust evidence collection disconnected from intended learning objectives. Such clarity supports intentional curriculum refinement, formative feedback design, and equitable opportunity-to-learn analysis across diverse learner populations.

4.1. Engagement: Access, Role, and Responsibility

Merely appearing on a participant list does not constitute genuine engagement; rather, authentic involvement requires the student to assume a functionally defined role that entails discernible responsibilities and opportunities for independent judgment. Such roles must be articulated in concrete, observable terms—such as drafting project documentation, facilitating peer feedback sessions, or interpreting collected data—rather than vague descriptors like 'assisting' or 'being present.' Even at introductory levels, the role should involve decision-making within clearly bounded parameters, such as selecting appropriate survey questions for a specific demographic or adjusting implementation timelines based on logistical constraints. This emphasis on accountability ensures that participation moves beyond passive attendance toward active intellectual and practical contribution, thereby supporting the development of professional competencies aligned with educational objectives.

Role progression must be intentionally scaffolded to reflect increasing mastery and confidence: novice participants typically begin with well-structured, time-limited assignments that build foundational skills; intermediate students may assume coordination responsibilities—for instance, managing subgroup deliverables or synthesizing input from multiple stakeholders; advanced participants are prepared to lead design phases, supervise peers, mediate inter-institutional communication, or co-develop assessment criteria with faculty. This tiered structure prevents role stagnation and avoids concentrating high-impact responsibilities exclusively among a fixed cohort of student leaders, thus promoting equitable capacity-building across diverse learner backgrounds and fostering inclusive leadership pathways within academic service-learning contexts.

Assessment rigor must remain proportionate to the scope, duration, and complexity of the activity: a one-day campus-based outreach initiative appropriately emphasizes clarity of task execution, responsiveness to immediate community needs, and reflective articulation of personal learning outcomes, whereas an extended field-based research project demands sustained analytical engagement, methodological adaptability, ethical decision-making, and synthesis of interdisciplinary insights. The central evaluative criterion remains consistent across all formats—namely, whether the student undertook a substantive, identifiable task; demonstrated comprehension of its contextual significance and intended impact; and produced tangible outputs—such as annotated datasets, publicly shared presentations, or collaboratively authored reports—that are verifiable and meaningful to external audiences including community partners, academic reviewers, or peer learners.

4.2. Learning: Reflection, Feedback, and Transfer

Active participation in educational activities does not automatically equate to meaningful learning; cognitive consolidation requires deliberate, structured opportunities for students to engage in retrospective analysis. Learners benefit significantly from guided moments of metacognitive review—where they examine the sequence of actions taken, identify discrepancies between intended outcomes and actual results, recognize emergent patterns or unexpected challenges, and consciously evaluate which insights, strategies, or competencies hold enduring value for future academic or practical tasks. This reflective process need not be time-intensive or formally documented; indeed, a concise, well-facilitated debriefing session immediately following an experiential activity often yields deeper conceptual integration than a delayed, exhaustive

written report [10]. Such timely reflection can help students connect new experiences with prior knowledge and retain lessons for later application.

Effective reflection must remain tightly anchored to the concrete details of the activity itself, avoiding abstract generalizations disconnected from practice. For instance, a student-run organization can systematically juxtapose its original implementation plan against on-site execution records to identify decision points where adaptation occurred and assess the rationale behind those shifts [3]. Similarly, a social-practice research team may re-examine annotated field notes, interview transcripts, and observational logs to trace how initial assumptions evolved in response to community interactions. A competition-based project group might reconstruct iterative design revisions, mapping how external feedback—from mentors, peers, or domain experts—prompted substantive modifications to methodology, scope, or presentation strategy. This grounded, evidence-informed approach ensures that tacit knowledge, procedural adaptations, and context-sensitive judgments are explicitly surfaced, codified, and retained—not lost as ephemeral impressions once the activity concludes.

The principle of transfer constitutes a cornerstone of sustainable competence development, enabling learners to mobilize skills, mindsets, and methodological fluency across diverse academic, professional, and civic domains. A student who cultivates empathetic listening, stakeholder negotiation, and adaptive messaging during community volunteer service may subsequently apply those same communication competencies when coordinating interdepartmental collaboration in a university innovation incubator or representing a student initiative before administrative bodies. Likewise, foundational competencies acquired through structured field inquiry—such as systematic observation, contextualized data collection, ethical engagement with participants, and iterative hypothesis refinement—can be deliberately repurposed in undergraduate research projects, entrepreneurship ventures, or policy analysis assignments. This cross-contextual application transforms discrete, episodic engagements into a coherent trajectory of intellectual growth, where each experience builds upon and enriches the last, fostering resilience, adaptability, and lifelong learning capacity.

4.3. Assessment: Evidence Matched to the Activity

Assessment design must be carefully calibrated to the scope, duration, and cognitive demand of the learning activity. For routine classroom tasks or brief collaborative exercises, streamlined evaluation methods—such as peer feedback summaries or brief self-assessments—are pedagogically appropriate and time-efficient. In contrast, extended interdisciplinary projects, capstone assignments, or community-engaged learning experiences warrant more comprehensive assessment frameworks that capture both procedural engagement and substantive achievement. Evidence supporting such assessments should be diverse and triangulated, encompassing tangible artifacts like written reports, prototypes, or digital portfolios; documented roles and responsibilities assigned during group work; structured reflective statements that articulate learning insights and metacognitive growth; qualitative input from supervising educators or external collaborators; and evaluative judgments regarding the rigor, originality, and coherence of the final output [8]. This layered approach ensures that assessment reflects authentic learning rather than superficial compliance.

Relying exclusively on single-point indicators—such as competition rankings, award certificates, or logged service hours—introduces significant validity threats, as these metrics often obscure individual agency, intellectual contribution, and developmental progress [8]. For instance, a team-based science fair award may mask disparities in conceptual understanding or research skill acquisition among members, while standardized volunteer hour tallies fail to distinguish between passive attendance and leadership in initiative design or stakeholder coordination. Therefore, robust assessment requires intentional integration of outcome evidence—what was produced—with process evidence—how it was conceived, iterated, and refined. This includes documentation of planning stages, revision histories, collaborative decision logs, and formative feedback

cycles, all of which collectively illuminate the learner's evolving competencies in critical thinking, adaptability, and responsible citizenship.

Consequently, second-classroom records—such as those documenting extracurricular involvement, project-based learning, or community service—can be significantly enhanced without increasing administrative burden. Rather than listing generic descriptors like '10 hours of volunteer service,' educators may concisely specify the student's functional role (e.g., 'coordinated logistics for intergenerational literacy tutoring' or 'designed data collection instruments for local environmental survey'). Similarly, competition records should clarify disciplinary contributions: whether the student conducted field observations, developed computational models, synthesized literature, managed experimental variables, or delivered public-facing presentations. Such precision supports longitudinal tracking of competency development, informs personalized academic advising, and supports personalized student advising, developmental guidance, and program improvement—all while upholding ethical principles of transparency, fairness, and educational purpose over surveillance or performative accountability.

5. Institutional Application

5.1. Connect Existing Programs into Developmental Pathways

Applying experiential learning approaches does not necessitate the creation of entirely new activity systems; instead, it calls for a systematic reexamination of existing educational programs to identify and leverage the latent learning opportunities they inherently provide. For instance, student clubs—whether focused on debate, journalism, or digital media—offer rich contexts for developing interpersonal communication, collaborative planning, and leadership competencies through sustained peer interaction and self-governance. Volunteer service initiatives foster ethical reasoning, civic responsibility, and empathetic engagement by situating students in authentic community contexts where they interact directly with diverse stakeholders. Social practice projects deepen contextual understanding and cultivate field-based inquiry skills, enabling students to observe systemic challenges, formulate relevant questions, and gather evidence through interviews, surveys, or participatory observation. Similarly, innovation and entrepreneurship competitions encourage students to transform everyday observations into structured problem analyses, prototype development, and evidence-informed proposals. The institutional role, therefore, shifts from program initiation to intentional recognition, pedagogical scaffolding, and cross-program coordination that makes implicit learning outcomes explicit and cumulative.

Crucially, establishing developmental pathways does not entail enforcing uniform progression across all students; rather, it requires honoring individual interests, strengths, and evolving aspirations. While some learners demonstrate sustained commitment to community service, others gravitate toward scientific research, cultural preservation, entrepreneurial ventures, or organizational leadership. The guiding principle is longitudinal continuity: each successive learning opportunity should deliberately extend prior experiences—building upon previously developed competencies, conceptual frameworks, and reflective habits—rather than resetting expectations or repeating foundational tasks [3]. This approach maximizes pedagogical efficiency, conserves limited human and financial resources, and supports deeper knowledge integration over time. Institutional design must therefore include flexible entry points, differentiated mentoring structures, and mechanisms for documenting and recognizing growth across varied domains—ensuring coherence without constraining diversity of engagement.

5.2. Use Role Progression to Widen Access to Meaningful Work

Student leaders continue to play a vital role in academic and extracurricular initiatives; however, leadership development must be intentionally inclusive rather than self-perpetuating. Structured role progression pathways—such as advancing from initial participant to task-specific leader and subsequently to project coordinator—enable

broader participation while cultivating sustained engagement and competence. This tiered model supports experiential learning by aligning responsibilities with demonstrated capacity and accumulated experience [1,4]. Furthermore, returning students who have completed prior cycles of involvement are well-positioned to serve as peer mentors, offering contextualized guidance, modeling reflective practice, and reinforcing community continuity. Such mentorship not only strengthens interpersonal networks but also enhances the socialization process for newcomers, reducing barriers to entry and fostering psychological safety within collaborative environments.

This systematic approach to role allocation also enables academic staff and program coordinators to distribute responsibilities more equitably and pedagogically purposefully. Instead of defaulting to familiar or historically active individuals, advisers can implement calibrated task assignment—matching increasingly complex responsibilities with participants’ developmental readiness, prior contributions, and expressed interests. Senior-level roles, such as project coordination or cross-team liaison functions, should be reserved for activities that genuinely demand advanced judgment, integrative thinking, or institutional knowledge—not merely tenure or visibility. Such intentionality promotes fairness, mitigates burnout among over-relied-upon students, and cultivates a sustainable leadership ecosystem grounded in capability, accountability, and shared ownership.

5.3. Coordinate Academic and Student-Affairs Support Selectively

Certain second-classroom initiatives—such as social practice programs, innovation and entrepreneurship competitions, and interdisciplinary project-based learning—derive substantial value from structured academic engagement. For instance, market research components may require statistical literacy and survey design principles; cultural communication projects often benefit from expertise in linguistics, media studies, or intercultural theory; and digital tool development frequently necessitates foundational knowledge in computer science, data visualization, or human-computer interaction. In these contexts, academic faculty can offer targeted disciplinary grounding, methodological rigor, and critical feedback on conceptual frameworks, while student-affairs professionals ensure logistical continuity, student motivation, inclusive participation, and alignment with holistic developmental goals [10]. This complementary division of labor fosters pedagogical coherence without compromising the experiential, voluntary, and exploratory nature of co-curricular activities.

Indiscriminate integration of academic oversight across all co-curricular activities is neither efficient nor educationally sound. Mandating formal academic supervision for routine club operations, peer mentoring sessions, or community volunteer efforts would impose unsustainable workloads on teaching staff, dilute the distinctive affordances of informal learning environments, and risk transforming flexible, student-driven experiences into rigid, assessment-oriented extensions of the formal curriculum. Academic involvement yields optimal impact when deliberately calibrated to moments of intellectual demand—such as when students formulate research questions, interpret complex empirical findings, refine theoretical arguments, prototype solutions to real-world challenges, or prepare high-stakes deliverables like competition submissions, exhibition portfolios, or policy briefs that merit expert evaluation and scholarly validation.

5.4. Make Records Useful for Guidance and Program Improvement

Records serve a meaningful function only when they actively inform pedagogical decisions and support individualized developmental pathways. For instance, consistent engagement in community service activities may indicate emerging competencies in stakeholder engagement, ethical reasoning, or collaborative problem-solving—competencies that could naturally scaffold progression toward more complex responsibilities such as leading needs assessments, facilitating participatory planning sessions, or coordinating interdisciplinary service teams. Conversely, repeated involvement in competitive academic events without commensurate growth in methodological rigor or communicative clarity may reveal persistent gaps in foundational research literacy, including hypothesis formulation, data interpretation, or evidence-

based argumentation—gaps that warrant targeted instructional interventions rather than generalized encouragement. Crucially, the interpretive value of records lies not in summative evaluation but in their capacity to generate actionable insights about learning trajectories, scaffolding needs, and readiness for increased autonomy.

At the programmatic level, such records enable staff to conduct iterative, evidence-informed reviews of curriculum design, activity structure, and role allocation. When an initiative consistently achieves high attendance yet yields minimal tangible outputs—such as incomplete deliverables, superficial reflections, or limited peer interaction—it may signal misalignment between intended learning outcomes and actual task demands, prompting revision of role expectations, time allocation, or scaffolding supports. In contrast, a project demonstrating sustained participant engagement, progressive assumption of leadership functions, and production of contextually relevant, usable artifacts—even if modest in scale or visibility—provides strong qualitative evidence of deep learning and systemic impact. This transforms assessment from a retrospective compliance exercise into an embedded, formative practice integral to ongoing educational judgment, continuous improvement cycles, and responsive program stewardship.

6. Discussion

The Engagement–Learning–Assessment (ELA) framework does not purport to introduce a novel theoretical model of student development. Rather, its primary contribution lies in operational clarity: it reframes a persistent institutional challenge—namely, the difficulty of moving beyond superficial metrics—to render it more visible and tractable for practitioners. While universities routinely collect quantitative data on program enrollment, event attendance, and service delivery, such metrics often fail to capture the qualitative substance of student engagement. Specifically, institutions frequently lack systematic documentation of what students actually performed within experiential contexts, how their competencies, perspectives, or dispositions evolved as a result of participation, and whether discrete learning episodes were meaningfully connected across time and setting. By centering analysis on three interlocking dimensions—role enactment, learning outcomes, and evidentiary traces—the ELA framework synthesizes well-established principles from educational psychology and experiential learning theory into a practical, action-oriented structure. This structure supports routine reflection, collaborative review, and iterative improvement within student affairs units without requiring specialized methodological training or extensive resource investment.

This integrative function is especially vital because the so-called 'second classroom'—encompassing co-curricular programming, leadership initiatives, community engagement, peer mentoring, and other non-credit-bearing learning environments—operates across multiple administrative silos. Academic departments, residential life offices, career services, student organizations, alumni relations, and external community partners each contribute distinct components to the holistic student experience, yet they often maintain fragmented recordkeeping systems and divergent evaluation criteria. When each unit reports only its own proximal outputs—such as workshop counts, volunteer hours logged, or satisfaction survey scores—the institution accumulates voluminous data while remaining unable to construct a coherent, longitudinal narrative of individual student growth. The shared conceptual anchors of role, learning, and evidence serve as a unifying analytical lens, enabling cross-functional dialogue about program coherence, developmental sequencing, and equity of access. Crucially, this common language respects disciplinary and functional autonomy: it does not impose uniform standards but instead invites stakeholders to articulate how their unique contributions align with broader educational aims.

It is important to acknowledge that the current articulation of the ELA framework reflects an initial conceptual and pragmatic synthesis rather than an empirically validated measurement instrument. Its foundations are drawn from established policy frameworks, peer-reviewed scholarship on student development, and recurrent patterns observed in

multi-year professional practice. Given the considerable heterogeneity among private undergraduate institutions—including differences in educational mission, faculty–staff ratios, student demographic composition, technological infrastructure, and data governance policies—the framework’s applicability may require contextual adaptation [3,7,10]. Future empirical work could rigorously examine specific components through methods such as longitudinal portfolio analysis, structured interviews with students across academic years, comparative case studies across institutions with varying resource profiles, or mixed-methods assessments of implementation fidelity and perceived utility among practitioners. Such investigations would help determine which elements demonstrate robust transferability and which may benefit from refinement to better serve diverse institutional ecologies and evolving student needs.

7. Conclusion

The concept of the 'second classroom'—encompassing co-curricular, extracurricular, and experiential learning environments—is frequently defined by its structural features: scheduled meetings, formalized roles, or institutional affiliations. Yet such descriptors obscure what truly matters for student development: the quality, depth, and intentionality of student action within those settings. A densely packed calendar of events does not guarantee meaningful cognitive or affective engagement; conversely, a single, well-structured project—when designed with clear intellectual stakes, authentic accountability, iterative feedback loops, and opportunities for reflection and transfer—can catalyze durable learning outcomes. The distinction lies not in volume or visibility but in whether students are positioned as agents who interpret, apply, revise, and extend their understanding across contexts. This requires deliberate scaffolding: tasks that demand judgment rather than compliance, assessments calibrated to developmental progression rather than uniform output, and support systems that respond to emerging needs without preempting ownership.

A robust framework for evaluating such experiences can be distilled into three interlocking dimensions: engagement, learning, and assessment. Engagement centers on whether students enter into work that is substantively consequential—intellectually rigorous, socially relevant, and personally resonant—not merely occupationally busy. Learning focuses on how meaning is constructed from experience: the extent to which students articulate insights, connect prior knowledge to new challenges, recognize patterns across domains, and adapt understandings in novel situations. Assessment, meanwhile, must serve developmental fidelity—not bureaucratic accountability—by identifying evidence that reflects growth in capacity, not just completion. Crucially, these dimensions are not sequential stages but mutually reinforcing practices; sustained attention to their dynamic interplay ensures that participation evolves into competence, and competence matures into agency.

For private undergraduate institutions, this perspective invites a strategic recalibration: prioritizing refinement over accumulation, coherence over proliferation, and pedagogical intentionality over programmatic scale. Existing infrastructure—including student-led organizations, community-engaged initiatives, design-based competitions, and social innovation challenges—already holds considerable untapped educational potential. Realizing it depends on systematic enhancements: reimagining role structures to distribute leadership and responsibility equitably; mapping conceptual and skill-based continuities across disparate experiences; integrating academic advising and disciplinary mentoring at critical inflection points; and developing lightweight, longitudinal record-keeping systems that capture growth trajectories rather than discrete event logs. Ultimately, the measure of success is not the quantity of offerings but the demonstrable continuity between experience and development—the degree to which each activity serves as a credible stepping stone toward increasingly complex, self-directed, and socially responsive forms of learning and contribution.

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