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Transforming Science And Engineering Education: The Impact Of The Downhill Challenge Flipped Classroom Model

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This study examines the "Downhill Challenge," an educational initiative at Tecnoló´gico de Monterrey, Campus Cuernavaca, that merges experiential learning with engineering education through a flipped classroom model. Since its launch in 2017, the project has integrated physics, engineering design, sustainability, and project management into a hands-on compe- tition inspired by Soapbox motorless vehicle races. The flipped classroom approach has led to a 30% increase in engineering enrollments by 2024, significantly boosting student motivation, critical thinking, problem-solving skills, and teamwork. This paper analyzes survey data and participant feedback, demon- strating how innovative educational practices can drive student engagement and enhance learning outcomes in STEM education.

Index Terms—Educational Innovation, Higher Education, Learning Models, Flipped Classroom.

I. INTRODUCTION

The teaching of science and engineering has undergone significant transformation in recent years, driven by the need to equip students with the skills and knowledge required to thrive in a rapidly evolving world. Traditional educational models, while foundational, often fall short in addressing the dynamic and interdisciplinary challenges of modern society. In response, educators have increasingly turned to disruptive methodologies that emphasize experiential learning, where students actively engage in hands-on, real-world projects. A prime example of this approach is the "Downhill Challenge," a competition implemented at Tecnolo´gico de

Monterrey, Campus Cuernavaca, inspired by traditional gravity vehicle races, as seen in Fig.1. This innovative initiative serves as a practical application of academic concepts, allowing students to experience the direct impact of their engineering decisions while simultaneously developing essential professional compe- tencies such as critical thinking, problem-solving, teamwork, and innovation.

Fig. 1. Team 15 at Downhill Challenge 2019

The effectiveness of such experiential learning approaches is well-supported by existing literature, particularly in the context of STEM education (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics). Research has shown that project-based learning and the flipped classroom model, where students engage with lecture material independently and apply knowl- edge during class through interactive activities, significantly enhance student engagement, understanding, and retention. However, despite the documented benefits, there remains a critical need for further research exploring the specific im- pact of these methodologies on students' career choices and the development of transversal skills—competencies that are increasingly recognized as vital across all professional fields.

The primary objective of this study is to evaluate the impact of the ”Downhill Challenge,” combined with the flipped classroom model, on students' interest in pursuing engineering careers and their development of key com- petencies. By assessing the outcomes of this initiative, the study aims to provide valuable insights into how innovative educational practices can not only increase enrollment in engineering programs but also better prepare students for the multifaceted challenges they will face in the 21st-century workforce. Understanding these impacts is essential for the ongoing design and refinement of educational programs that align with both the evolving demands of the job market and the holistic development of students as future professionals.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The ”Downhill Challenge” is grounded in several pedagogi- cal theories and approaches that together create a strong foun- dation for understanding its effectiveness as an educational tool and its impact on students' academic performance and motivation.

A key theory underpinning this framework is Self- Determination Theory (SDT), proposed by Deci and Ryan in 1985 [1]. SDT suggests that intrinsic motivation is en- hanced when three fundamental psychological needs are met: competence, autonomy, and relatedness. In the context of the "Downhill Challenge," students develop a strong sense of competence as they tackle complex challenges that require the practical application of physics and design concepts. These activities not only allow students to demonstrate their skills but also provide opportunities to refine and expand their abilities, which is crucial for maintaining and increasing intrinsic mo- tivation. Additionally, the challenge offers students autonomy by empowering them to make meaningful decisions during the design and construction process, reinforcing their control over their learning. The collaborative nature of the project also fosters relatedness, creating a supportive and cooperative learning environment.

Another foundational pillar is the Flipped Classroom methodology. This approach involves students acquiring theo- retical knowledge outside the classroom, often through digital resources such as videos or readings, and then applying this knowledge during class through practical activities. In the "Downhill Challenge," this method enables students to come to class already familiar with the theoretical concepts, maximizing the time available for designing and building their vehicles, while receiving real-time feedback on their projects. This approach has been shown to enhance academic performance in STEM disciplines [2] by fostering a more engaged and active learning experience.

Project-Based Learning (PBL) is also central to the "Down- hill Challenge." PBL encourages learning through active in- volvement in projects that have real-world significance. Ac- cording to Barron and Darling-Hammond [3], PBL is particu- larly effective in developing essential skills such as problem- solving, collaboration, innovation, and critical thinking—skills that are critical in engineering education. In the "Downhill Challenge," students apply their technical knowledge to an engineering project, collaborate as a team, manage resources, and make decisions that directly impact the project's success. This hands-on experience not only reinforces the theoretical knowledge gained but also provides practical insights into how these concepts are applied in real-world scenarios. Further- more, by engaging deeply in the entire design, prototyping, and construction process, students gain valuable experience that can positively influence their decision to pursue a career in engineering, as they witness firsthand the impact and possibilities of this discipline.

The integration of Self-Determination Theory, Flipped Classroom methodology, and Project-Based Learning in the "Downhill Challenge" provides a comprehensive approach that not only enhances students' technical and theoretical skills but also increases their interest and engagement in their education, better preparing them for future challenges in engineering.

A. Related Studies

The influence of educational challenges and projects on ca- reer choice has been widely studied. Research by Browne and Geiger [4] shows that participation in STEM projects during secondary education significantly increases the likelihood of students pursuing careers in these fields. Similarly, Johnson et al. [5] found that projects combining theory and practice, such as the "Downhill Challenge," effectively increase interest and retention in engineering programs. This study contributes to the field by analyzing the long-term impact of a challenge-based project on career choice, offering empirical data on how such activities influence engineering program enrollment at Tecnolo´gico de Monterrey.

A prominent example is the Solar Challenge[1], an interna- tional competition where students design, build, and compete with solar-powered vehicles. Like the Downhill Challenge, the Solar Challenge integrates engineering, physics, and design knowledge but focuses more specifically on sustainability and innovation in renewable energy. The Solar Challenge primarily targets advanced university students, contrasting with the Downhill Challenge's accessibility to pre-university students. Despite these differences, both challenges highlight the importance of integrating sustainability into engineering education, a principle that inspired aspects of the Downhill Challenge's design, particularly in categories like the "most sustainable vehicle."

Another relevant example is the NASA Human Exploration Rover Challenge[2], where students design and construct rovers to simulate missions on lunar or Martian surfaces. This project shares the hands-on learning and problem-solving focus of the Downhill Challenge but emphasizes high-tech specifications and space exploration. The precision and technological inno- vation required in the Rover Challenge have influenced the Downhill Challenge by encouraging a rigorous application of physics and mechanics principles, albeit in a more terrestrial context.

[1]The Solar Challenge is an international competition where university teams design and race solar-powered vehicles to promote sustainable tech- nology and renewable energy.

[2]The NASA Human Exploration Rover Challenge is a competition where students design, build, and race rovers on simulated extraterrestrial terrain, fostering STEM skills and innovation.

The Flipped Classroom methodology is widely adopted in projects aiming to maximize classroom time for practical and collaborative activities. For instance, the EDpuzzle project allows students to access theoretical content through inter- active videos outside the classroom, dedicating class time to applying that knowledge in collaborative projects. This approach is particularly effective in engineering and applied sciences, where understanding theoretical concepts is crucial for success in practical activities.

Similarly, the Downhill Challenge uses the flipped class- room to prepare students with the necessary theory before practical design and construction sessions. While EDpuzzle[3] focuses on interactive video-based learning, the Downhill Challenge stands out for its emphasis on competition and the tangible application of skills in a dynamic and competitive environment. This methodology ensures that students arrive in class ready to apply what they have learned, maximizing time spent on hands-on practice and problem-solving, a crucial aspect of engineering education.

Experiential learning, as highlighted by Kolb [6], remains a highly influential theory in education and professional devel- opment. Kolb describes a learning cycle that includes concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization,

In summary, the integration of these theories and method- ologies in the Downhill Challenge provides a robust frame- work that supports the educational goals of the project, foster- ing a deep and meaningful learning experience that prepares students for the complexities of engineering and beyond.

III. RESULTS

A. Data Presentation

The competition day marks the culmination of an intensive 4 to 5-month process. During this time, both participating students and mentor professors invest significant time, effort, and creativity. This preparatory period is characterized by the practical application of knowledge acquired in various scien- tific disciplines, such as physics and mathematics, alongside the development of technical and design skills necessary to construct a vehicle capable of overcoming an obstacle course. Throughout these months, students work in teams to design, prototype, and manufacture their vehicles, facing real technical challenges that test their ability to apply theoretical concepts in a practical context. For instance, in the ”rolling kinematics” topic, students connect concepts such as:

- Energy conservation:

1

and active experimentation. This cycle is fundamental in projects like the Downhill Challenge, where students learn

$E_{p0} = mgh_0$ and $E_{cf} =$

$\frac{}{}mv^2$,
2

by actively participating in the design and execution of a project, developing key competencies through reflection on their experiences.

Panitz [7] further examines how collaborative learning, where students work together to solve problems, fosters the development of social and teamwork skills. The importance of positive interdependence and individual accountability in team success is emphasized. Vygotsky’s social constructivism theory, particularly his concept of the ”zone of proximal de- velopment,” is crucial for understanding collaborative learning [9]. This concept highlights how students can achieve higher levels of knowledge and skill through collaboration with peers. In the Downhill Challenge, students collaborate in teams, each with specific roles and responsibilities, promoting coordination and communication.

Finally, in considering the role of critical thinking in these projects, Facione [8] offers a detailed definition of critical thinking and explores its importance in education. The study provides tools and strategies for teaching and assessing critical thinking in the context of project-based learning. Critical thinking is framed within metacognition theory, which emphasizes awareness and control over one’s thinking processes—essential for solving complex problems. As students reflect on the outcomes and performance of their vehicles, they engage in critical evaluation and continuous improvement, addressing technical challenges that require both analytical and creative solutions.

[3]EDpuzzle is an interactive video platform that allows educators to create, edit, and embed questions into videos to enhance student engagement and assessment.

- Mechanical energy of an object rolling on an inclined plane,
- Moment of inertia:

  $I = mr^2$,
- Linear velocity.

Beyond the competition itself, where students can win awards in categories such as best time, best engineering design, best characterization, most sustainable vehicle, and lightest vehicle, the event serves as a platform for reflection on the learning process. At the end of the competition, students complete a survey designed to measure their satisfaction with both the learning and experiential aspects of the event. This survey provides crucial data on how students perceive the educational value of the competition and how it has influenced their interest in engineering and science disciplines.

Tables I and II summarize the study's results, highlighting key findings related to participants and their decisions regard- ing engineering careers.

TABLE I NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS BY YEAR AND ACADEMIC LEVEL

Year	High School	University
2017	208	120
2018	240	176
2019	160	180
2023	200	200
Total	**808**	**676**

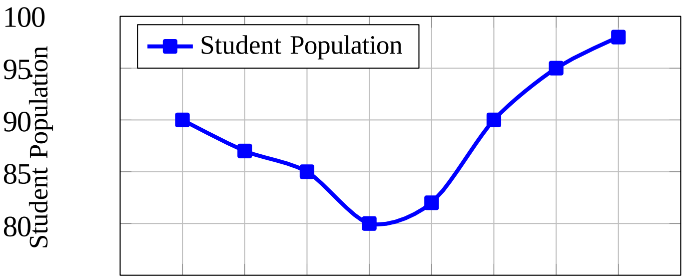
The results indicate a notable increase in interest in pur- suing a degree in the School of Engineering compared to previous years. According to the records of new enrollments

TABLE II DOWNHILL CHALLENGE PARTICIPANT REGISTRATION BY YEAR AND CONVERSION TO STEM-RELATED CAREER INTEREST

Year	Number of Participants	Students Who Chose Engineering	Conversion Rate (%)
2017	208	50	24.04
2018	240	60	25.00
2019	160	28	17.50
2023	200	62	31.00

at the School of Engineering at Tecnolo´gico de Monterrey, Cuernavaca campus, the trends are shown in Fig. 2.

Incoming Engineering Student Population Over Time



The following figures display the responses to a five- question survey conducted with 676 students enrolled in an engineering program and participants of the Downhill Chal- lenge. Each question offered five response options structured on a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 represented ”completely agree” and 5 ”completely disagree.”

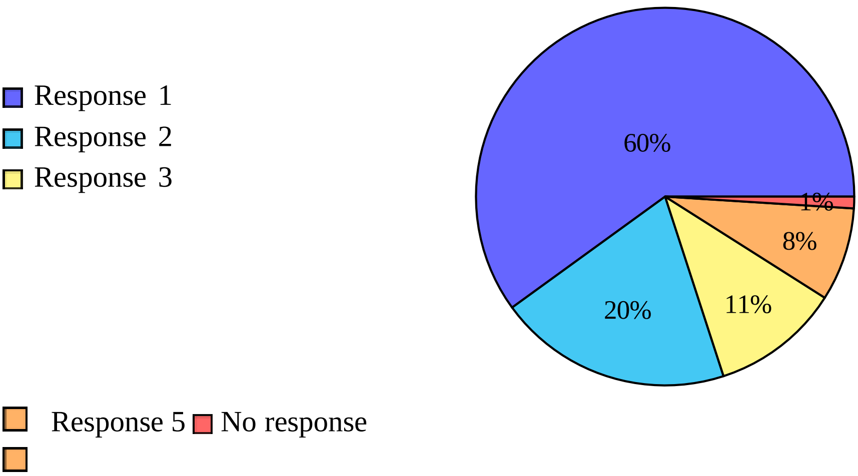


Fig. 4. Q1: My understanding of the concepts improved due to this experience.

2017 2018 2019 2020 2021 2022 2023 2024

Year

Fig. 2. Incoming Engineering Student Population from 2017 to 2024.

Focusing on the specific factors driving the increase in new student enrollment, it was found that the conversion rate of participants into enrolled engineering students is significantly higher compared to those who participate in other events and later decide to enroll in an engineering program. This trend is illustrated in Fig. 3, underscoring the Downhill Challenge as a flagship project for community engagement and growth in new enrollments.

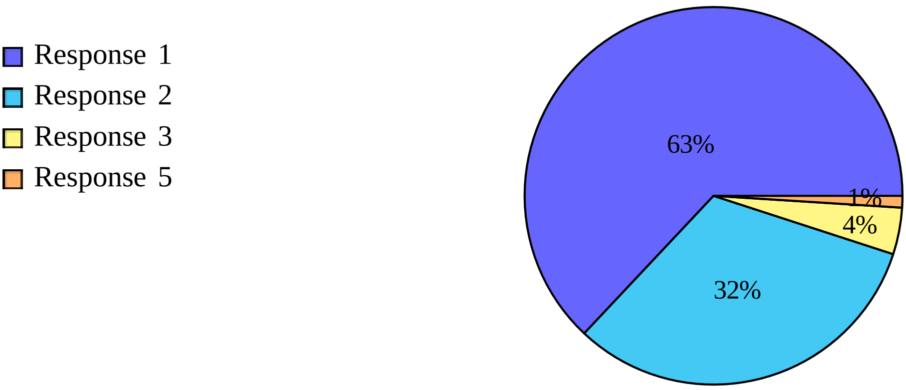
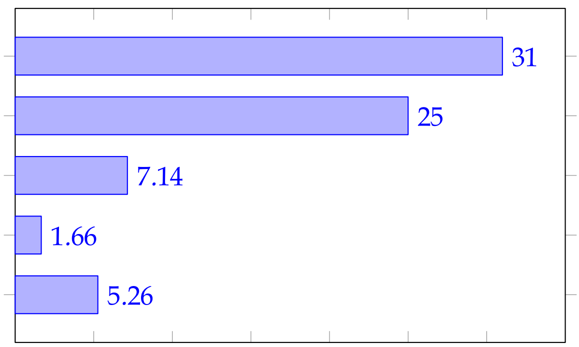


Fig. 5. Q2: My participation in the DHC motivated me to learn more.



E D C B A

0 5 10 15 20 25 30 35

Conversion Rate (%)

Fig. 3. Conversion rates of participants to enrolled students in 2023 events at Tecnolo´gico de Monterrey, Cuernavaca campus. Categories: A - BTEC, B - Information session, C - International Science Competition, D - TEC Academics, E - Downhill Challenge.

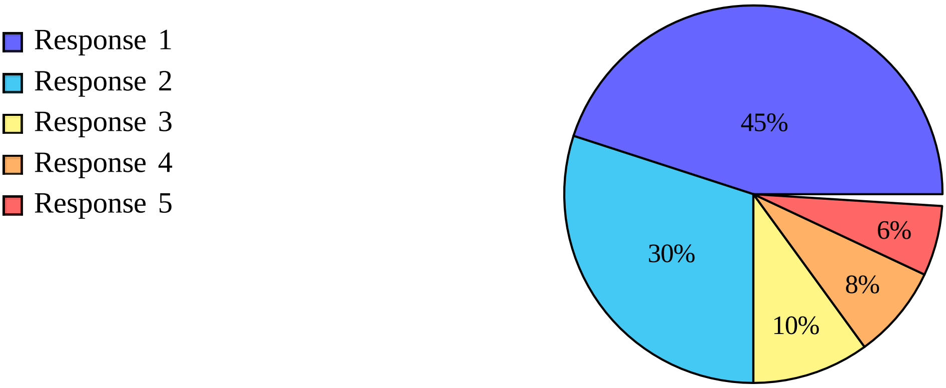


Fig. 6. Q3: My curiosity for learning was increased or motivated by my participation in the DHC.

The survey results show that over 50% of respondents provided positive answers, with the majority leaning towards

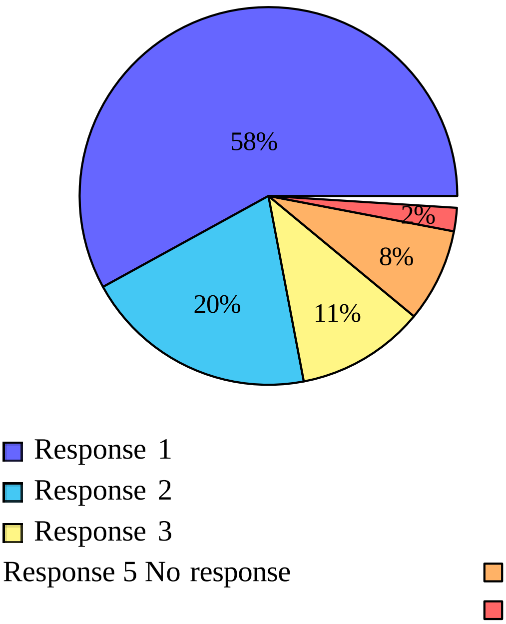


Fig. 7. Q4: This type of project helped my problem-solving ability.

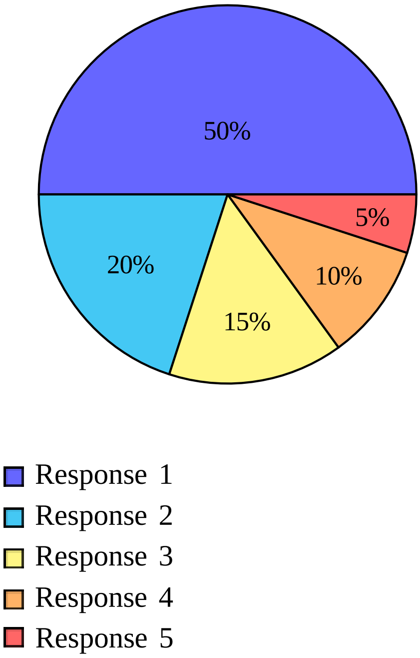


Fig. 8. Q5: Overall, I enjoyed the activity and believe there should be more projects in my classes using methodologies (flipped classroom) like those applied in the activity.

”completely agree” or ”agree.” The specific results for each question are as follows:

- **Question 1 (Fig.4):** ”My understanding of the concepts improved due to this experience.” 80% of students ”com- pletely agreed” or ”agreed” that their participation in the Downhill Challenge improved their understanding of concepts, primarily in physics and mathematics.
- **Question 2 (Fig.5):** 90% of respondents ”completely agreed” or ”agreed” that their participation in the Down- hill Challenge motivated them to learn more.
- **Question 3 (Fig.6):** 75% of students ”completely agreed” or ”agreed” that their curiosity for learning increased or was motivated by their participation in the Downhill Challenge.
- **Question 4 (Fig.7):** 78% of respondents ”completely agreed” or ”agreed” that this type of project helped improve their problem-solving skills.
- **Question 5 (Fig.8):** 70% of students ”completely agreed” or ”agreed” that they enjoyed the activity and believe that more projects like this one should be conducted in class, using methodologies such as those applied in this activity (flipped classroom).

B. Analysis and Interpretation

The data indicate that students who participated in the Downhill Challenge experienced significant improvements in their understanding of concepts, motivation to learn, and problem-solving skills. The positive feedback on the flipped classroom methodology suggests that students found this ap- proach effective in enhancing their learning experience. The increase in engineering enrollments among participants sup- ports the idea that experiential learning projects can influence students' decisions and interests.

It is important to consider that external factors, such as the social environment, may have influenced the results, given that Tecnolo´gico de Monterrey served as the educational platform for developing the project.

IV. **DISCUSSION**

A. Summary of Key Findings

The findings of this study align closely with existing research, demonstrating that early exposure to hands-on, practical projects, such as the Downhill Challenge, signifi- cantly enhances interest in STEM disciplines. This observa- tion is consistent with Self-Determination Theory [1], which emphasizes the importance of fulfilling basic psychological needs—competence, autonomy, and relatedness—in fostering intrinsic motivation. The Downhill Challenge effectively meets these needs by allowing students to deeply engage with the material, make meaningful decisions, and collaborate with peers. Moreover, the results align with the flipped learning methodology [2], which posits that shifting theoretical learning outside the classroom and dedicating class time to interactive, practical applications can lead to improved engagement and understanding.

These findings reinforce the notion that challenge-based projects do more than enhance academic learning; they also play a critical role in boosting students' intrinsic motivation. The experiential nature of the Downhill Challenge, which requires students to apply theoretical knowledge in a real- world context, fosters a deeper connection to STEM fields. This connection is crucial as it not only increases students' interest in pursuing STEM careers but also equips them with the practical skills and confidence needed to succeed in these fields.

B. Implications for Educational Practices

The implications of these findings are substantial, partic- ularly in the context of educational practices and policy- making. Practically, the results suggest that the implementation of methodologies such as the flipped classroom and project- based learning could serve as key catalysts in increasing enroll- ment in STEM programs. By integrating these methodologies, educators can create a more engaging and effective learning environment that not only enhances academic achievement but also fosters a lasting interest in STEM disciplines.

For educators, these findings highlight several actionable steps:

- **Adapting Challenge-Based Learning to Local Con- texts:** Educators can draw inspiration from the Downhill Challenge to create similar projects tailored to their specific student populations. This could involve adapting the project to fit different educational levels, disciplines, or cultural contexts, ensuring that the challenge is relevant and engaging for all students involved.
- **Incorporating Flipped Classroom Techniques:** The success of the flipped classroom model in this study sug- gests that educators should consider using this methodol- ogy to maximize the effectiveness of classroom time. By providing students with foundational knowledge outside of class, educators can devote in-class time to collabora- tive, hands-on activities that reinforce learning.
- **Promoting Interdisciplinary Collaboration:** The project-based approach seen in the Downhill Challenge can be expanded to include interdisciplinary elements, encouraging students from different fields to work together. This mirrors the collaborative nature of real-world problem-solving and prepares students for the interdisciplinary demands of the modern workforce.
- **Using Technology to Enhance Engagement:** Integrating technology, such as simulation tools or virtual collabora- tion platforms, can further enhance student engagement. These tools can make learning more interactive and im- mersive, helping students better grasp complex concepts and stay motivated throughout the project.

By implementing these strategies, educators can foster a more dynamic and responsive educational environment that better meets the needs of diverse student populations, ultimately leading to improved learning outcomes and greater interest in STEM disciplines.

C. Limitations

While this study provides valuable insights, it is not without its limitations. One significant limitation is the inability to collect data during the years 2020-2022 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This gap in data collection may have influenced the overall findings, as the pandemic introduced unprece- dented challenges and changes to the educational landscape. The rapid shift to online learning during this period likely altered the traditional dynamics of student engagement and interaction. Consequently, the absence of data from this period may obscure potential variations in student motivation and learning outcomes that could have emerged under different instructional conditions. Future research could address this gap by examining longitudinal data that includes both pre- pandemic and post-pandemic contexts to better understand the pandemic’s long-term effects on educational practices and outcomes.

Another limitation is the study’s focus on a specific sample of students from a single campus. This narrow focus may limit the generalizability of the findings to other contexts and populations. Although the sample was representative in terms of gender and academic diversity, it is important to acknowledge that different educational settings, institutional cultures, and regional factors could yield different results. For instance, students from campuses with different levels of access to resources or varying educational priorities may respond differently to the Downhill Challenge. To mitigate this limitation, future studies could involve multiple campuses across diverse geographic regions, thereby providing a broader perspective on the effectiveness of challenge-based learning models in different educational environments.

Finally, the study's reliance on self-reported data, such as surveys and interviews, may introduce bias. Although every effort was made to ensure the objectivity and reliability of these instruments, self-reported data can be influenced by var- ious factors, including students' perceptions, recollections of their experiences, and the desire to provide socially desirable responses. These biases may have led to an overestimation or underestimation of the true impact of the Downhill Challenge on students' learning outcomes. To address this issue, future research could incorporate additional data collection meth- ods, such as direct observations, performance assessments, and longitudinal tracking of students' academic and career trajectories. These complementary methods would provide a more comprehensive and objective evaluation of the long-term effects of experiential learning initiatives.

By acknowledging these limitations and proposing strategies to address them, future research can build on the findings of this study and contribute to a deeper understanding of the factors that influence the success of educational innovations like the Downhill Challenge.

D. Recommendations for Future Research and Practice

Based on the study's findings and limitations, several rec- ommendations can be made for future research and practice.

First, expanding the study to include multiple campuses and a broader range of student populations is recommended. This would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of challenge-based learning across different contexts and help identify any variations in effectiveness. Specifically, a comparative analysis using mixed methods—combining quantitative surveys with qualitative interviews—could offer deeper insights into the differential impacts across diverse educational settings.

Second, future research should consider conducting long- term follow-up studies to evaluate the sustained impact of projects like the Downhill Challenge on students' career choices and professional trajectories. Longitudinal studies employing cohort tracking could be particularly useful in this context. Such studies could gather data on students' academic performance, persistence in STEM fields, and career outcomes over time. Additionally, the inclusion of control groups—students who did not participate in similar challenge- based projects—would allow for more robust comparisons and help isolate the effects of the experiential learning model.

Third, it is advisable to explore the incorporation of other challenge-based projects that encompass a variety of disci- plines beyond STEM. This would help determine whether the positive effects observed in STEM education can be replicated in other fields of study, such as the humanities, social sciences, or business. In these cases, adopting a cross-disciplinary research design could be beneficial, where the outcomes of challenge-based learning are compared across different academic disciplines. Furthermore, the use of experimental designs with pre- and post-assessments could help determine the specific elements of these projects that contribute most to student learning and engagement.

Additionally, integrating technology, such as design and simulation tools, could further enhance the motivational impact of these projects by providing students with more interactive and immersive learning experiences. Future research could explore the effectiveness of these technological tools through randomized controlled trials (RCTs), measuring their impact on student engagement, comprehension, and retention of com- plex concepts.

Finally, educational institutions should consider adopting a holistic approach that combines challenge-based learning with other innovative pedagogical models, such as flipped classrooms, project-based learning, and service-learning. By implementing a blended pedagogical strategy, institutions can create a more flexible and responsive educational environment that meets the diverse needs of today's students. Future research could investigate the synergies between these ap- proaches, perhaps through case studies or action research that explore best practices in integrating these models effectively. By delving deeper into the practical implications of these findings, this discussion provides a comprehensive guide for educators and researchers looking to implement or study similar initiatives in their own educational contexts.

V. CONCLUSIONS

A. Synthesis of Findings

The "Downhill Challenge" project has proven to be a highly effective tool for motivating and engaging students in science and engineering. Over the years, participation in this competition has significantly increased students' interest in engineering disciplines, with a notable 30% rise in enrollments in related programs by 2023. The integration of methodologies such as the flipped classroom and project-based learning has empowered students to apply theoretical concepts in practical, real-world situations. This approach not only enhances their understanding of the material but also cultivates critical skills such as teamwork, problem-solving, and critical thinking.

As the educational landscape continues to evolve with changing student preferences, motivations, and expectations, it is imperative for educational institutions to continuously adapt their pedagogical strategies. This adaptability ensures that they remain relevant and effective in shaping the professionals of tomorrow. The use of both quantitative and qualitative approaches in this study has proven to be a robust strategy for validating the initial hypothesis. The results confirm the effectiveness of the "Downhill Challenge" and highlight the potential of such projects as powerful tools in the teaching- learning process. The significant increase in student motiva- tion and interest in STEM fields underscores the value of combining these methodologies to foster a more dynamic and engaging educational environment, cultivating students' curiosity and commitment to key disciplines critical for future societal development.

B. Contributions to the Field

This work makes a substantial contribution to educational innovation by demonstrating how dynamic and experiential projects can transform the teaching and learning of science and engineering. The "Downhill Challenge" goes beyond merely promoting the learning of technical concepts; it also develops essential transversal competencies that are crucial for students' future professional careers. The project underscores the importance of integrating modern pedagogical approaches, such as the flipped classroom, to create more meaningful and engaging learning experiences. Furthermore, the principles underpinning the "Downhill Challenge" are not limited to the context of engineering education; they have the potential to be adapted and applied across various educational fields and levels, thereby broadening their impact. These findings suggest that incorporating experiential learning into the curriculum can significantly enhance student engagement, motivation, and overall educational outcomes, making it a versatile model for educational innovation.

C. Future Directions

Looking ahead, future research could explore the expansion of the ”Downhill Challenge” to other geographic regions and educational levels to assess its effectiveness across diverse contexts. Such expansion would provide valuable insights into how this approach can be adapted to different student populations and educational settings. Moreover, the core principles of the ”Downhill Challenge” could be extrapolated to other disciplines beyond engineering, offering a framework for interdisciplinary educational innovation. Investigating the integration of emerging technologies, such as simulations and digital tools, could further enrich the educational experience. By leveraging these technologies, educators can create more immersive and interactive learning environments that not only enhance the educational experience but also have a long-term impact on the training and development of professionals in various fields.

Moreover, a longitudinal study examining the long-term effects of participation in the ”Downhill Challenge” on stu- dents’ career choices and professional development would provide a deeper understanding of its lasting impact. This would help educators and policymakers design more effective educational programs that align with the evolving demands of the workforce and the global economy. Ultimately, the insights gained from such research could lead to the development of more tailored and impactful educational strategies that prepare students not only for academic success but also for thriving in their future careers.

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