

Student Participation in College Student Organizations: A Review of Literature

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This article reviews several studies on extracurricular participation in college student organizations. College student organizations appear to provide students a variety of opportunities to become acquainted with the campus life within an institution. College student organization participation cultivates satisfaction with the college experience, increases campus and community involvement, and enhances intellectual development.

Sometimes labeled as "the other education," participation in extracurricular activities provides opportunities for students to apply classroom knowledge to real world settings and develops skills that will assist in the practical realities of living after graduation (Astin, 1993; Kuh, 1995). The added supplement of extracurricular activity involvement such as that found in college student organization participation can be a significant factor in a student's college experience. On most campuses, college student organizations tend to fall into the following categories: governing bodies, greek letter social organizations, student government groups, academic clubs and professional societies, honor societies, publication and media groups, service groups, intramural sports clubs, religious organizations, and special interest/cultural groups (Astin, 1993; Craig & Warner, 1991).

Research in extracurricular involvement has emphasized the importance of supplementing academic learning with learning that occurs outside the formal classroom environment. The enhancement of student learning with activities outside the classroom is consistent with the initial goals of student affairs work; to develop the whole student (American Council on Education, 1949). A variety of student development changes in regards to cognitive and affective growth are associated with participation in college extracurricular activities. Extracurricular activity involvement cultivates noticeable changes in a student's behavioral traits and personality characteristics (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991).

The following article reviews several studies on extracurricular involvement in college student organizations among college and university students. While the literature investigating the influence of extracurricular activities is extensive in the student affairs field, the

following is not an exhaustive review of the literature on college student organizations. Its purpose is to provide a general understanding of the influence college student organization participation has on several aspects of the college experience. Studies investigating factors associated with participation and non-participation in college student organizations are summarized to provide an idea of the extent membership influences the overall college experience. Three educational outcomes (college satisfaction, campus involvement, and student development) will be addressed in order to assess the effect college student organization participation has on each outcome. A brief summary on the limitations of the reviewed studies, especially with regard to their generalization of findings to diverse student populations, will be provided.

Factors Related to Participation and Nonparticipation

College-sponsored activities do not receive the full participation of all students despite the opportunities associated with extracurricular involvement. Burton (1981) conducted one of the few studies focused on determining if demographic and personality characteristics could be used to differentiate and describe participants and non-participants of social, recreational, athletic, and cultural college extracurricular activities at a large state university. Burton hypothesized that there would be differences in levels of participants and non-participants using the aforementioned variables.

Students were surveyed on dimensions of interpersonal behavior (e.g., wanting or expressing inclusion, control, and affection). By forming nine homogeneous groups of students formed with respect to level of activity participation, multivariate analysis of variance statistical procedures were used to examine if these characteristics influenced extracurricular participation. Burton found that extracurricular participation was not significantly influenced by personality characteristics such as "good personalities, good intelligence, and adequate funds" (p. 252). Selected demographic data such as age, sex, GPA, high school and/or college leadership participation were also found not to be significant indicators of extracurricular participation in college.

No distinct personality characteristics were found that significantly influenced extracurricular participation among participants in Burton's study. These findings questioned the ability to transfer leadership roles and extracurricular activities from high school to college.

Burton recommended that in order for student affairs professionals to identify potential participants and non-participants of extracurricular activities in college, less traditional ways of identification should be considered. Burton neither describes nor suggests what constitutes these new methods. Despite this lack of knowledge, information can still be gained on certain characteristics that led to student extracurricular participation.

Extracurricular activity participation was determined, not necessarily from personality or environmental characteristics of students, but rather from factors that were not fully assessed by previous studies looking at the predisposition to participate in college extracurricular activities. Berk and Goebel (1987) found that it was individual characteristics, not previous high school environments (such as high school size), which exerted stronger influence on extracurricular participation in college. For example, students from large high schools were just as likely to become active college extracurricular participants as students from smaller high schools, especially in large university settings (Berk & Goebel, 1987). Regardless of their high school size, students who maintained high levels of participation in extracurricular activities during high school were significantly more likely to be participators in college extracurricular activities (Berk & Goebel, 1987). Although research tended to focus on the background characteristics of students, little emphasis has been placed to use these characteristics as descriptive identifiers of participants and non-participants of extracurricular college activities.

Craig and Warner (1991) found that non-greek, non-governing organizations (e.g., academic clubs, service groups, sports clubs, religious groups, special interest groups, etc.) were crucial components in the campus life of large institutions. They were crucial because these organizations far outnumbered fraternities/sororities, student government, and program boards on college campuses-organizations that were frequently described as "traditional organizations". Non-greek/non-governing organizations appeared to service those students who needed to establish connections to the college environment: "Knowing who the members [of these organizations] are make servicing these groups even more critical because [through these organizations] we are servicing those students who are the least 'connected' to our campus" (Craig & Warner, 1991, p. 42).

Craig and Warner listed two general groups of students that joined

non-greek/non-governing student organizations. The two types of groups that participated in these organizations were described as "the serious, academically oriented" student and the "at-risk" student (Craig & Warner, 1991, p. 42). Additionally, members of academic, cultural/special interest, religious, sports club, and service groups tended to be "multicultural" first-generation college students (Craig & Warner, 1991). This study, however, did not provide a discussion on how measures were developed to create these classifications. The authors did not provide a detailed description outlining what characterized these two groups of students. Still, useful information on the distinct characteristics of student participants could still be gathered.

Understanding why college students participated in extracurricular activities such as college student organizations can be associated with several factors. Individual student characteristics, along with the present college environment (e.g., the kind of institution, the curriculum, the faculty, and peers), influenced levels of activity participation (Astin, 1993). Astin described what entailed the "student life" of a college campus. The student life of an institution included "social life, opportunities to attend cultural events, opportunities to participate in extracurricular activities, and regulations governing campus life" (Astin, 1993, p. 284). A student who attended a large institution would probably have a greater number of extracurricular activity opportunities as well as have more diverse social opportunities, for example, like those found through participation in college student organizations. Students with more opportunities to participate in the overall student life of the institution could have more student-to-student interactions. Consequently, student interactions were found to cultivate a more active social life in college (Astin, 1993). Having an active college social life by participating in college student organizations could influence how one perceives his or her own college experience.

Abrahamowicz's (1988) study on the effects of college student organization membership on student perceptions, satisfaction, and college involvement provided an analysis on the effects of a campus' student life, especially the effects participation in student organizations had on various measures of the college experience. Abrahamowicz's single-institution study compared quantitative measures of college perception, satisfaction, and involvement from a sample of student members involved with recognized university-funded organizations and fraternities/sororities with those from students who were not members

of these groups. By using the College Student Experiences Questionnaire (CSEQ) to assess these variables, the study found that significant differences existed between the college experiences of undergraduate students who were members of organizations compared to students who were not (Abrahamowicz, 1988).

Participants of college student organizations were more likely to perceive their educational experiences as having high quality compared to those of non-participants (i.e., participants were more involved in their overall college experience) (Abrahamowicz, 1988). Feelings of satisfaction and positive perceptions of relationships with faculty, administration, and students were also concluded to be significantly associated with student organization participation (Abrahamowicz, 1988). Thus, non-participants did not have the same level of connection to their campus compared to students who were members of college student organizations.

Educational Outcomes Related to Student Organization Participation

College Satisfaction

Participation and membership in university-sponsored organizations provided college students ample opportunities to have a greater magnitude of student-to-student interactions. Frequency of interactions was supported by the amount of time a student spends in college student organizations which in turn was said to be associated with overall satisfaction with college (Astin, 1993). Participation in college student organizations can create positive feelings about the overall college experience. According to Astin, the variables used in his longitudinal study that were shown to have positive effects with satisfaction in campus life "leaned heavily toward student interaction and social life" which included "hours per week spent in student clubs and organizations" (p. 285).

Student-to-student interaction and collegiate social life through student organization involvement has positive relationships with a favorable college experience (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). These favorable experiences reinforce high aspirations and goals for college. To achieve these aspirations and goals, these students tended to become more involved with their college experience. By increasing their involvement levels in their college experience,

these students consequently increased their participation in campus life.

Abrahamowicz (1988) found that when measures of attitude toward college are considered, individuals involved in college student organizations had significant differences in their responses measuring feelings of satisfaction toward their institution when compared to students who were not involved in these organizations. College student organization members appeared to have more positive feelings about their current environment and felt satisfied with their educational experience (i.e., gave positive ratings on how well they like college and the institution they were attending). When asked to respond to how well they liked college, a majority of college student organization members (65%) said they were "enthusiastic" about college compared to 17% of non-members of student organizations (Abrahamowicz, 1988). Abrahamowicz also found significantly more positive perceptions of relationships with faculty, administrators, and students among college student organization members. These significant variances apparent in responses between college student organization members and non-members underscored the noticeable differences in attitudes toward the overall college experience.

Emphasizing the idea that college student organization membership influenced campus life perceptions, Williams and Winston, Jr. (1985) investigated participation in campus-recognized organizations among undergraduates at a large public university. Their study found that membership in a college student organization was positively related to perceived satisfaction of the student's current college experience. Using the Student Development Task and Lifestyle Inventory (SDTLI), it was found that students who were members of college organizations believed that they held a greater meaning of their present college experience (i.e. were more aware of their educational environment) compared to non-members and thus were able to explore more thoroughly their interests, goals, and values (Williams & Winston, Jr., 1985).

Increasing students' level of connection to their campus by providing numerous opportunities for peer interactions and endorsing a wide-ranging social life by way of student organizations were positively associated with students' feelings of satisfaction with the student life of their campus (Astin, 1993). Extracurricular participation in college student organizations benefited those who were least connected to their college campuses: "There is considerable evidence...that

active participation in the extracurricular life of a campus can enhance..." positive attitudes about student life within individuals to make them feel more connected to campus (Noel, 1987, as cited in Craig & Warner, 1991, p. 42). The significant levels of campus satisfaction expressed by members of college student organizations tended to enhance their overall college experience.

Campus Involvement

Increased satisfaction with the college experience as a result of organization participation motivates college students to become active participants in the student life of their institution. The extracurricular activities that comprise an institution's student life produce opportunities for students to interact with one another and facilitate involvement with the social aspects of the college as well as with the more formal academic environment.

For each of the fourteen categories of a "quality of effort" scale measuring the amount of extracurricular activities students became involved in at their campus on the CSEQ, members of college student organizations had significantly higher mean scores than nonmembers (Abrahamowicz, 1988). Activities that were cited ranged from the number of library visits by students to membership and participation in clubs and organizations (Abrahamowicz, 1988). One possible explanation for this result could be that college student organization members naturally were more involved in student life in comparison to nonmembers.

Extracurricular participation, however, appeared to nurture activity beyond the scope of the member's student organization. Members of college student organizations extended their involvement into other campus areas. Increased participation in faculty relations, library visitation, interest in theater and the arts, and technology were a few of the areas cited for increase student involvement (Abrahamowicz, 1988).

Williams and Winston, Jr. (1985) found that when compared to non-members of student organizations, members understood their abilities and limitations more clearly and began to explore their interests and values. As shown in the significantly higher levels of task achievement in education and career plans on the SDTLI, student organization members became more aware of resources and learning opportunities available to reach these goals. Pascarella and Terenzini

(1991) found that when thinking in retrospect, college graduates perceived their extracurricular involvement as "having a substantial impact on the development of interpersonal and leadership skills important to general occupational success" (p. 478). College student organization participation enhanced interpersonal and leadership skills, allowing students to explore their goals and to identify steps to achieve these goals.

Schuh and Laverty (1983) studied the long-term effects of involvement obtained from organization participation on a sample of student leaders from three institutions. Leadership positions in extracurricular activities such as student government, fraternities, sororities, and campus newspapers were found to have a positive effect on increased participation in community and civic organizations. In general, students continue to stay aware and become involved in community and political activities even after their terms as college student organization leaders end (Schuh & Laverty, 1983). The study emphasized that college student organization membership can be associated with continued organizational involvement and continued interactions with a variety of peers long after graduation from college.

Continued extracurricular involvement in student organizations produced informed citizens who actively participated in addressing those issues that are of most interest to them. Students viewed community involvement in a positive light and saw their involvement as directly affecting their leadership skills (Schuh & Laverty, 1983). The perceived influence on leadership and other skills emphasize the potential impact organizational participation could have on the development of college students.

Student Learning and Development

In regards to college student organization membership and its effect on critical thinking and intellectual development, Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) supported Astin's (1993) notion that the degree of involvement in activities (i.e., intellectual, vocational, social, athletic, etc.) was significantly associated with cognitive and affective growth. Pascarella and Terenzini, in their thorough review on how college affects student development, found that frequency and quality of students' interactions with other students and their involvement with extracurricular activities (e.g., college student organization participation) were positively associated with high educational aspirations,

enhanced self-confidence, and increased interpersonal and leadership skills: "The greater the students' involvement in college, the greater will be the amount of student learning and personal development" (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, p. 36). As stated by the researchers, "perceived [cognitive] growth tended to be commensurate with involvement in activities that were consistent with it and supported it" (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, p. 147).

Using GRE scores as measures of learning, Anaya (1996) explored the influence of student experiences and college environments on cognitive development. For the variable of college student organization involvement, the study used student scores on a scale of levels of involvement in a number of activities (e.g., participation in Greek organizations, elected student office, performing volunteer work). The study found that college student organization involvement has a negative effect on verbal learning (Anaya, 1996). The study suggests that an increase in the number of hours spent on college student organization involvement reduced the amount of time and energy necessary to devote to activities directly related to verbal and quantitative learning (Anaya, 1996). Despite these findings, it should be considered that in college settings a variety of extracurricular activities are available for student participation.

In a qualitative study by Baxter Magolda (1992), the impact of the undergraduate co-curricular experience (e.g., college student organization involvement, peer relationships, living arrangements, employment, etc.) on intellectual development was investigated over a four-year period. By interviewing students from their freshmen to senior year, Baxter Magolda found that college organization participation and affiliation cultivated students' intellectual development by initially teaching them responsibility and independence in regard to meeting new people and becoming knowledgeable to the campus environment. Intellectual development further progressed to higher levels of independent functioning reinforced by being able to communicate well with others and holding leadership positions in organizations. Baxter Magolda's qualitative approach allowed students to provide descriptions of their college experience and college organization involvement that captured "the multiple realities of students' experience and interpretations of [cocurricular experiences] impact" in order to "understand how cocurricular experiences contributed to development" of students who participate in campus student organizations (p. 205).

Astin (1993) postulated that a student's learning and development were directly proportional to the quality and quantity of a student's involvement in the academic experience. Astin noted that hours spent in college student organizations per week were positively associated with higher intellectual skills requiring independence and responsibility such as improvement in public speaking skills and holding an elected office. It appeared that participation in a college student organization impacted intellectual development by promoting awareness of both the educational environment and the resources and learning opportunities available for students to meet academic standards.

The influence campus organization participation had on student learning was emphasized by Smith and Griffin's study (1993) on the relationship between extracurricular involvement and psychosocial development. Smith and Griffin found that participation in extracurricular activities promoted academic autonomy for college students. Gaining academic autonomy was described as "enhancing the students' development of the ability to attain their educational goals with minimal help from others" (Smith & Griffin, 1993, p. 81). As levels of extracurricular involvement increased, academic autonomy increased. Especially for seniors, extracurricular involvement improved their ability to initiate career and lifestyle plans (Smith & Griffin, 1993).

In a three-year study by Cooper, Healy, and Simpson (1994), results showed becoming a member of a college student organization had positive effects on student development. As entering freshmen, students who said that they would participate in college student organizations differed significantly on the Life Management index (i.e. items measuring perceptions of personal health, handling finances, and independence) of the SDTLI compared to students who said they intended not to participate (Cooper, Healy, & Simpson, 1993). Freshmen who considered becoming members of college student organizations planned to pursue opportunities that enhanced their academic experience to achieve goals and objectives (Cooper, Healy, & Simpson, 1993).

Students who were members of college organizations between their freshmen and junior year of college showed more significant changes than non-members on indices estimating educational involvement. Being a member of a college organization and being involved in campus life tended to have "direct positive effects on student learning both in and out of the classroom" (Cooper, Healy, & Simpson, 1993, p.

101). College student organization members appeared to show more growth than non-members in tasks that lead to overall student success (e.g., Developing Purpose, Educational Involvement, Lifestyle Planning, and other indices on the SDTLI) (Cooper, Healy, & Simpson, 1993).

Students involved in organizations gave more meaning to their college experience and thus have significantly greater levels of interdependence, education plans, career plans, and lifestyle plans (Williams & Winston, Jr., 1985). Measures of collegiate social participation had statistically significant positive effects on educational attainment for both men and women (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). When students were exposed to other achievement-oriented students through college student organizations and other social networks, students were able to acquire personal resources such as interpersonal skills, self-confidence, and specialized knowledge that encourage the realization of goals and aspirations (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Involvement in college student organizations could increase students' understanding of their abilities and limitations in their education environment. Thus, extracurricular activity participation could be an important facet in a student's college experience in that "such participation seems to be an effective means of stimulating personal development" (Williams & Winston, Jr., 1985, p. 58).

Limitations of Reviewed Studies

Research on involvement in student organizations suggested a positive influence on cognitive gains, affective development, academic success and college persistence. From these investigations on student involvement in student organizations, most of the reported findings relied on mainstream predominantly White groups. Research samples comprised mostly of middle class Whites provided the "norms" for college organization experiences where "diverse persons and diverse experiences often appeared other than 'normal'" (Stage & Anaya, 1996, p. 49). Generalizations from the reviewed studies were "particularly problematic when [researchers used] predominantly and traditionally White student organizations such as fraternities, sororities, student government, religious groups, choir groups, and intramural groups" as the focus for their studies (Trevino, 1992, p. 24). Minimal amounts of research have explored minority student involvement in college student organizations (Rooney, 1985). Much of the research has failed to

consider the contributions of minority student involvement in college student organizations, especially in minority college student organizations (Rooney, 1985; Trevino, 1992).

Although participation in extracurricular activities was seen as a positive component of the college experience of students, most studies failed to provide racial and gender breakdowns of their samples and most expressed caution regarding generalizations to other groups since mostly White student leaders and traditional college student organizations that were predominantly White were profiled (e.g., Cooper & Simpson, 1994; Schuh & Laverty, 1983). For the most part, focus was placed on identifying statistically significant findings for Whites, despite researchers' acknowledgment of racial differences in their discussions (e.g., Smith & Griffin, 1993).

The research literature on college student organization participation reflects a problem that has been prevalent in the higher education-student affairs field. It was not until very recently that college student research broke away from research practices where observations of human behavior and development were generalized to all populations, despite the fact that most studies used a limited sample consisting of only White middle or upper class males at elite institutions (Stage & Anaya, 1996).

Discussion

Participation in college student organizations promotes affective and cognitive changes within college students. Involvement in extracurricular activities, especially in college student organizations, has benefits extending beyond classroom learning. Participation in extracurricular activities contributes to the intellectual, social, and emotional changes in a person over time. Outcomes associated with participation in college student organizations includes cognitive development or higher intellectual processes such as critical thinking, knowledge acquisition, synthesis, and decision-making, as well as personal or affective development of attitudes, values, aspirations, and personality disposition. However, some college student organizations affect student learning negatively while others assist in the promotion of cognitive development.

Participation in college student organizations has been shown to have an influence on affective outcomes of the college experience, such as cultivating a student's sense of satisfaction with the college experi-

ence and in increasing participation and involvement within campus and community. College student organization participation also was an influential component in a student's total co-curricular experience as shown by enhancing intellectual development and by allowing students to become aware of and involved with the educational environment. Students were able to assess campus resources to achieve their educational goals.

On the whole, participation in college student organizations appeared to provide students with a variety of opportunities to become better acquainted with the campus life within an institution. While students' personality characteristics and previous levels of participation in extracurricular and leadership activities in high school were not significant predictors of college extracurricular involvement, these factors could be used to identify those who would accept the opportunity to become involved in extracurricular activities, such as participation in college student organizations. College campus environments with multiple student life components provide ample opportunities for organization participation that could influence subsequent participation in such activities.

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