

Student Involvement and Motivation to Participate
in Undergraduate Organizations

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Abstract

Prior research has looked at what influences students to participate in different kinds of extra-curricular activities, such as sororities, fraternities, major-related clubs, and interest-oriented clubs, as well as the factors dissuading involvement. Motivations vary depending on students' unique circumstances such as work, distance from campus, and other factors. Our research focuses on major-related organizations to determine what factors influence involvement and if motivations are career-oriented or not. Our research has shown that most students do consider the benefits of joining an organization or club before committing to it. They also use this membership as a stepping-stone towards success in the future. The research focuses on a mostly student-run, undergraduate organization at a university in northeastern Pennsylvania known as "SLAB" (Sound and Literary Art Book) that reviews submissions for the literary magazine they produce annually. In addition, data was collected from students not involved in that particular organization to examine and compare motivations behind involvement. Our results and discussion provide support for our research question and show that future-related goals and organization benefits influence students' motivations to participate in major-related organizations.

Keywords: undergraduate organizations, involvement, motivations

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Students often choose to participate in clubs and organizations that are related to their major and future profession for various reasons. Our goal in researching this topic is to discover how frequently students look at the benefits of a major-related extracurricular activity before joining. Do students learn about these activities through "word of mouth" communication or perhaps through more formal means of advertising? Are they motivated by interests or seeking to gain professional experience? These are the kinds of questions our research delves into. Organizations can tailor whom their target audience should be by looking at what influences students to get involved. If undergraduate students knew what they could gain from being a part of major-related organizations, especially pertaining to their career goals, we predict there would be more motivation to join.

We selected the organization, SLAB to examine for our research because of its experiential learning design. Students in SLAB read submissions of literary works sent by writers from all over the country and select pieces for publication in the magazine. Members of our research group had varying degrees of knowledge and involvement in SLAB, so different perspectives of it were represented as we conducted our research. We decided to collect input from members of SLAB on their motivations to join as well as the outcomes of their involvement.

Our research question asks: "Do students consider what a major-related extracurricular activity has to offer to their future prior to deciding to join?" We established this question by closely examining SLAB. Most of the student membership in SLAB is comprised of English majors. Many of these students also hope to pursue a profession in writing or publishing.

Involvement in SLAB is especially beneficial to students with these goals because they develop skills in a hands-on environment to create an actual publication that will be distributed to an audience wider than just the student population. With this knowledge in mind, we were able to formulate a research question that incorporated a strong example of a major-related organization featuring career-oriented learning. The research question is designed to encompass other organizations and memberships equally as useful as SLAB to majors besides English.

Literature Review

A variety of organizations exist on college campuses for students to choose from, and many students decide to take advantage of the opportunities provided through these organizations by getting involved. Research has shown the different benefits of involvement, including résumé building, gaining experience in one's field of interest, and being a part of a social community. Because of this, students have several motivational factors contributing to their decisions to join, and often times these motivations vary from student to student. Knowing what factors specifically motivate student participation can help organization leaders to better advertise and persuade students to be a part of their organizations.

Student Motivations to Participate in Extracurricular Activities

Because of the variations in types of college organizations including athletic, academic, social, and others, sources of motivation to join tend to vary. Roulin and Bangerter (2013) distinguish between internal and external deciding factors, with internal suggesting that "people perform an action either because it is interesting or enjoyable" and external, "because it may lead to positive outcomes" (p. 871). On the other hand, results from a study looking at participation in Greek life show that a student may choose not to participate in a club because of prior commitments such as job responsibilities or not knowing the extent of the benefits of joining an

organization (Fouts, 2010). Lack of awareness about an organization seems to be a major contributing factor behind students' decisions not to get involved. One study suggests a number of ways universities can promote campus organizations including recruiting representatives from organizations to speak to freshman about their organizations, advertising through several mediums such as campus radio, TV, flyers, newspaper, and informative booths, and providing brief presentations about campus organizations in freshmen classes on their first day (McCannon & Bennett, 1996). Raising awareness, however, does not account for individual motivations, which naturally vary amongst students.

Roulin and Bangerter (2013) cite six motives for participation used in a Likert scale survey, which are, "by interest or passion, to do something other than studies, to meet people, to help others, to acquire practical experiences, and because it will look good on my résumé," (p. 875). Factors such as students' obtainment of leadership positions within the club and how close students were to graduating when they joined influenced whether the motivation was internal or external as well (Roulin & Bangerter, 2013). These two factors would both suggest external motivation because a leadership position would be seen as a résumé builder, and joining an organization close to entering the job market could be for purposes of résumé building as well (Roulin & Bangerter, 2013).

The social aspect of motivation to join an organization also exists and can be influenced by peers. Because students may be more comfortable with joining an organization that individuals from their friend groups are a part of (Fouts, 2010), advertising through word of mouth can also be beneficial to an organization. Involvement in a club can increase students' sense of belonging to a community because they are working closely with students and faculty who share common interests with them and are able to meet a variety of people whom they may

not have met otherwise (Elkins, Forrester, & Noel-Elkins, 2011). The classroom format does not establish, to the same degree, this sense of community. The collaborative element of working with peers and faculty to accomplish a common goal through an organization sets students up to succeed outside of school as well (Elkins et al., 2011).

The majority (83%) of students participating in one study responded to a survey that they are not a part of any academic organizations related to their major (McCannon & Bennett, 1996). A common reason for the lack of involvement amongst these students was “‘having job responsibilities no time for a student organization’ or ‘not aware of any student organization related to major’” (McCannon & Bennett, 1996, p. 312). While this study was only looking at two colleges, and other schools may have better means of advertising major-related organizations, this still indicates that students may not know the benefits of such organizations. To address the issue of students having other responsibilities, organization leaders could consider varying the meeting times to fit everyone’s schedules or perhaps emphasize the idea that involvement could aid in pursuing a career instead of just a job (McCannon & Bennett, 1996). Student involvement in major-related organizations can also correlate with graduate success rates. Research dealing with this focuses on things such as finding a ways to better the education experience and ways to help students evolve as individuals. Cantor, Kimmelmeier, Basten, and Prentice (2012) mention that group participation is critical to self-definition because it enables personal exploration within the context of a network of stable social relationships. The ASHE Higher Education Report (2007) agrees that students learn by becoming involved.

Although reasons for joining a club vary from person to person and the benefits of different clubs are unique to the experience it provides, there is evidence to support the idea that involvement can be useful to students beyond their academic lives.

End of Sample

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