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An Evaluation of a Higher Education Service Organization: Assessing Student
Satisfaction and Productivity

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Abstract:

Using survey research method, the paper examined, evaluated, and assessed the services and programs provided by a graduate and professional student organization in a Big-10 University in the US. The organization provides services to over fifteen thousand graduate and professional students and has a significant role in enhancing and improving student life on campus. The purpose of this paper is to evaluate and assess the level of satisfaction and productivity as they relate to student life experience during graduate education. This paper contributes to our understanding of how student support services and programs impact student life in higher education.

Keywords: Graduate School Experience; Graduate Education Support; Higher Education Accountability; Quality in Higher Education

The Purpose of the Study

The increased demand in higher education and rapidly changing technology forces institutions of higher education to adapt new strategies and address these challenges adequately to remain competitive in the market. These challenges are in different formats in nature. Some are related to research and teaching quality while some are dealing with student issues such as financial aid, affordable education, and quality student life. These challenges are doubled with the constant pressures of remaining

competitive, being financially accountable, and providing unique opportunities for students that would enhance and impact their education. Some of these are addressed through various support services as such student organizations. Each student organization is unique and addresses to certain group of student with embedded interests in the mission and philosophy of that organization. Such organizations have become ever more significant in the context of student life due to rapidly changing student demographics that lead to much more diverse student populations on campus across the United States.

In contemporary pluralistic society, education an increasingly diverse group of students in multicultural competencies is central to the education mission of US colleges and universities (Grieger, 1996). Pope, on the other hand, presented the Multicultural Organizational Development (MOD) as a planned, proactive, comprehensive, systematic, and long-range model for introducing change for student support services committed to transformation into multiculturalism, and provided with a checklist that consists of 58 items organized in 11 categories (mission, leadership, advocacy, policies, recruitment and retention, and scholarly activities and services), based on MOD framework to serve as a guide in the transformational process (1993).

Many student organizations under the leadership of volunteers with varying levels of interests are struggling to survive with the limited resources and the challenges of non-profit settings. Institutions of higher education strive to provide their student bodies with adequate and quality student life. One factor to achieve this is through the implementation of quality and performance practices in these volunteer-run organizations. However, the role of program evaluation and assessment is crucial in this process. In fact, evaluation and assessment are considered as the core of identifying

future directions and providing institutional guidance. As defined by Gardner, evaluation is the process of specifying or identifying goals, objectives, or standards of performance; identifying or developing tools to measure performance (1977). He furthermore states that identification and judgement of actual outcomes irrespective of goals, standards, and the concerns of constituents, in which the principle focus of evaluation is professional judgement or an expert opinion of qualified professionals (1977). Furthermore, assessment is considered as any effort to gather, analyze, and interpret evidence which describes institutional, divisional, or agency effectiveness (Upcraft & Schuh, 1996, pp. 18-19).

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to evaluate the quality and effectiveness of the programs and services of a graduate student organization.

This paper is based on Upcraft and Schuh's (1996) model of evaluation that includes the steps of: 1) define the problem; 2) determine the purpose of the study; 3) determine the appropriate assessment approach; 4) determine the outcomes; 5) identify control variables; 6) identify environmental variables; 7) select measurement instruments; 8) determine study population and sample; 9) determine modes of statistical analysis; 10) develop and implement plan for data collection; 11) record the data in usable form; 12) conduct appropriate analyses; 13) evaluate the analysis for practical implementations; 14) develop strategies for utilization of the results. As a result, the study attempts to achieve the following objectives:

- a) To examine the impacts of the student organizations and support services on graduate students in higher education in terms of quality of life, academic support and development, and overall student experience;
- b) To understand the opportunities, challenges, and outcomes of student leadership involvement from the perspective of student life;
- c) To evaluate the current program and services offered;
- d) To assess the utility of the current program and services for the student population; and
- e) To identify new ways and methods to improve student life to be aligned with the vision and mission of institutions of higher education.

A survey of graduate students will examine the following research questions:

- 1) What are the significant impacts of the student organization and its support services on students' graduate education in terms of quality of life, academic support and development, and overall student experience;
- 2) What are student perceptions of satisfaction of the organization?
- 3) To what extent do students utilize the programs and services offered?
- 4) What are the areas of improvement and development?

Methodology

This is a relational research design. The target population of this study includes graduate students in the United States. The accessible population is the graduate students in a Big-Ten University. The sample size is approximately 1,500 participants. For the purposes of data gathering, a questionnaire is designed for this survey method. The questionnaire is in closed form; multiple-item and scales are used to rank the items in the

questions. Questions regarding demographic variables are also included at the end of the questionnaire. Before conducting the survey, a pilot testing is conducted among a sample of individuals from the population.

The data is collected via online questionnaire. The study used stratified sampling of 1,500 graduate students with a return rate of 355 (24 percent). The participants are sent an email about invitation to participate in the study through the questionnaire. The information on how to access to the online survey is provided in the email. Descriptive statistics of the variables are presented in order to analyze the independent variables. Statistical analyses are conducted to explore the relationships between the variables. Cross-tab analysis was conducted to explain the relationships among the variables. Reliability analysis was conducted with a Cronbach's alpha at .67. The reliability analysis indicates that the survey instrument is reliable.

Results

The result component of this paper addresses the research questions under investigation in the study.

Research Question 1: What are the significant impacts of the student organization and its support services on students' graduate education in terms of quality of life, academic support and development, and overall student experience?

Based on the mean scores, the majority of the students in the study were able to develop a number of skills, including communication, interpersonal, self-reliance, decision making skills as well as the ability to execute or implement plans and work on group projects. This is an important result to note as it identifies the extent the student organizations impact the student life at the graduate level. These skills are undoubtedly

very important for professional and developing such skills will only help students be better prepared for the professional careers upon graduation.

Table 1: Mean and Standard Deviation for Skill Development

	Mean	Std. Deviation
Communication skills	3.03	1.19
Interpersonal effectiveness	3.02	1.189
Self-reliance skills	2.96	1.21
Decision making ability	3.00	1.22
Ability to execute or implement plans	3.09	1.22
Ability to work on group projects	2.98	1.23
Leadership effectiveness	3.11	1.19
Ability to handle conflict management	2.85	1.24
Time management skills	2.97	1.20

In addition, the correlational analyses were conducted for these skill variables. According to the Pearson correlation significance two-tailed test, all of the variables were significantly related. Table 2 presents the correlation matrix.

Table 2. Bivariate Correlation Matrix for Skill Development

	CS	IE	SR	DM	AE	AW	LE	AC
IE	.90							
SR	.82	.85						
DM	.85	.82	.89					
AE	.81	.78	.84	.90				
AW	.80	.78	.82	.84	.89			
LE	.85	.81	.82	.87	.90	.85		
AC	.75	.75	.73	.80	.80	.75	.81	
TM	.81	.77	.80	.84	.83	.82	.79	.79

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

1. CS: Communication Skills
2. IE: Interpersonal Effectiveness
3. SR: Self-Reliance
4. DM: Decision Making
5. AE: Ability to execute or implement plans

- 6. AW: Ability to work on group projects
- 7. LE: Leadership effectiveness
- 8. AC: Ability to handle conflict management
- 9. TM: Time management skills

Research Question 2: What are student perceptions of satisfaction of the organization?

The study investigated the level of satisfaction of the students with the programs and services offered by the graduate student organization. According to the descriptive statistics Table 3 students were overall satisfied with the services and programs offered. The fact that fiscal responsibility has the highest mean indicates the efforts of financial accountability of the organization were also confirmed by the students in general.

Table 3: Mean and Standard Deviation for Student Satisfaction

	Mean	Std. Deviation
Leadership	4.17	1.21
Representing student voice on campus	4.04	1.27
Representing student voice at the Legislature	4.02	1.31
Fiscal responsibility	4.26	1.18
Publicity and outreach	3.91	1.31

According to Table 4, on the other hand, illustrates the correlation among the variables of student satisfaction. Representing students on campus and at the State Legislation were the most significantly correlated. Overall, student satisfaction variables were highly correlated.

Table 4. Bivariate Correlation Matrix for Student Satisfaction

	Leadership	Representing student voice on campus	Representing student voice at the Legislature	Fiscal responsibility
Representing student voice on campus	.77			
Representing student voice at the Legislature	.77	.85		
Fiscal responsibility	.81	.76	.74	
Publicity and outreach	.66	.67	.69	.63

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Research Question 3: To what extent do students utilize the programs and services offered?

Because the study used stratified sampling, it helped to better understand the amount of programs and services utilized by the students. The majority of the students do not utilize the services or the programs offered by the organization. This is very important to note and give further consideration.

Table 5. Percentage of Utilizations of Programs and Service

	Percent
Yes	30.8
No	68.6
Do not remember	.6

Research Question 4: What are the areas of improvement and development?

The results of the force-ranking item for the areas for improvement and development also provide some future directions the organization needs to focus on and address in order to maintain its presence and increase its outreach of programs and services. According to Table 6, quality of representation of student voice on campus and at the State legislation are the two areas that need the most significant improvement and development.

Table 6: Areas of Improvement & Development

	Percent
Quality of GAPSA leadership overall	22.9
Quality of representation of the student voice on campus	10.7
Quality of representation of student voice at state legislation	16.3
Quality of fiscal responsibility	29.3
Quality of public outreach	20.8

Conclusion

In an era where higher education is asked to be further accountable, student-governed organizations are no exemption to this trend. Operating and providing programs and services directly through student funding only adds an additional layer of accountability to the organizations of this type. Furthermore, organizations serving to graduate students may play a significant role in impacting graduate school experience to students who are faced with the challenge of balancing their academic and social life.

This study evaluated the quality, efficiency, and effectiveness of the programs and services offered by an organization serving to graduate students in a Big-Ten Research University in the U.S. One of the significant results of this study for further research is

the lack of utilization and participation of the majority of the students. Obtaining and utilizing student input in changing the system and addressing the issues is crucial in achieving civic engagement and contributing to a democratic society. Future research is needed to inquire student needs to improve the overall graduate school experience and achieve accountability.

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