

## **Are All Student Organizations Created Equal? The Differences and Implications of Student Participation in Academic versus Non-Academic Organizations**

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*This study examined differences between participation in academic and non-academic student organizations at a large, predominantly White, public research institution. A survey of 354 undergraduates revealed that students joined academic organizations to prepare for their futures while students joined non-academic organizations for immediate benefits such as making friends. Both groups indicated that their expectations were met and that they experienced personal benefits directed towards their goals, such as gains in field knowledge for students involved in academic organizations and interpersonal skill development for students in non-academic organizations. Implications for how administrators structure and direct students toward involvement opportunities are discussed.*

Astin's (1984) theory of involvement states that what students put into their college experiences, in terms of physical and psychological energy, they will get back in learning. Kuh (1995) reiterated that "the involvement principle is simple but powerful: the more time and energy students expend in educationally purposeful activities, the more they benefit" (p. 125). Research has supported the idea that students who become engaged with their college community enjoy specific benefits such as learning skills, acquiring knowledge, completing their degrees, and an easier path to obtaining employment (Abrahamowicz, 1988; Boyer, 1987; Kuh, 1995; Moore, Lovell, McGann, & Wyrick, 1998; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

One way students become engaged in their campus community is to join student organizations that meet their specific interests. In a study of what constitutes a successful collegiate environment, Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, and Whitt (2005) concluded that successful institutions were those who had a "wellspring of...cocurricular offerings that involve students in campus life, connect them to the institution, and provide leadership opportunities" (p. 238).

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Research has demonstrated, however, that students do gain more than just being connected to campus life or developing leadership skills. Baxter Magolda (1992) discovered that students' involvement in organizations gave them access to peers who then provided friendship, support, and knowledge. In addition, students reported beneficial experiences such as obtaining hands-on learning and being given increasing responsibility for organizational tasks. As the author concluded, "organizational involvement served a variety of purposes ranging from friendship opportunities to practical experience" (p. 208).

Kuh (1993) observed similar results in a study of what students learn outside of the classroom. He found that students were aware of a variety of developmental outcomes they obtained from their involvement experiences. However, he was surprised that academic outcomes were not mentioned by many students and when they were, they came from academically-driven environments such as laboratory experiences rather than involvement in student organizations.

Most of the research conducted on student organizational involvement has classified it in the broadest sense, assuming all organizations offer the same outcomes. College campuses today have a wide range of organizations to meet students' academic and personal interests. Beeny (2003) suggested that research might need to focus on "examining whether different types of student organizations influence the amount of expressed learning or the skills or competencies students report gaining" (p. 87). Gellin (2003) echoed the suggestion saying that "traditionally, scholars have used the moniker *clubs and organizations* to represent the large number of sponsored activities available on college campuses" but that the broad focus may not provide an accurate view of what those groups offer (p. 759).

The purpose of this study was to examine differences between academic and non-academic—categories of student organizations. Academic organizations were defined as those sponsored by academic colleges or departments such as Student Engineers' Council or the Society of American Foresters. Non-academic organizations were defined as those not sponsored by academic colleges or departments such as a residence hall council or the Pakistani Student Association. Specific research questions included:

1. Why do students become involved in academic and non-academic organizations?
2. Why do students stay involved in the organizations?
3. What skills or knowledge do students gain from their involvement in the organizations that they do not gain from their classroom experiences?
4. How does involvement in these organizations impact students' academic performance?

## Method

### *Participants*

Participants were part of a project that followed a randomly selected cohort of 741 traditional-age (18-22) undergraduate students throughout the 2005-2006 school year. The cohort consisted of undergraduate students attending a large, predominantly white, public research institution located in the southern United States. Members were sent a variety of web-based surveys during the academic year for the purpose of discovering in which co-curricular activities students were participating and what impact those activities had on academic performance. The cohort members were asked on two previous surveys if they were involved with student organizations. Those who provided affirmative responses were identified as subjects for this study.

### *Response Rates*

The selected participants received an e-mail request to complete an online survey regarding their specific student organization involvement. Five reminders were sent to participants who had not responded to increase response rates. Of the 554 participants who were sent the survey, 354 completed it (64%). Of the 354 responses, 286 were used for this study based on the responses to two initial questions asking whether or not participants were currently involved in academic or non-academic organizations. Table 1 illustrates the proportion differences for the demographics of both the survey participants and the undergraduate population for the campus during the collection period. Gender was significantly different than the campus population with an over-representation of females.

Table 1

*Proportion Differences Between Survey Participants and Campus Population*

Demographic Category	Survey Participants (n=354)	Campus Undergraduate Population (n=36,130)	$\chi^2$
<i>Gender</i>			
Female	64%	49%	4.59*
Male	36%	51%	4.41*
<i>Classification</i>			
Freshmen	20%	24%	0.67
Sophomore	22%	21%	0.05
Junior	25%	24%	0.04
Senior	33%	30%	0.30
<i>Residence</i>			
On-Campus	33%	25%	2.56
Off-Campus	67%	75%	0.85
<i>Ethnicity</i>			
African American	2%	3%	0.33
Asian American	3%	4%	0.25
Caucasian	82%	80%	0.05
Hispanic	10%	11%	0.09
Other	1%	1%	0.00
Prefer Not to Answer	3%	--	--

\* $p < .05$ *Data Analysis*

The instrument developed for this study consisted of two initial questions that asked participants (a) whether or not they were currently involved in any academic student organizations, and (b) whether or not they were currently involved in any non-academic student organizations. Affirmative responses to each initial question led to an additional six questions regarding the specific type of organization with which they were involved (i.e., participants involved in both types of organizations were asked a total of 12 additional questions). Those questions, including four qualitative and two quantitative, were as follows:

1. Why did you first become involved in academic/non-academic student organizations?
2. Why have you stayed involved in academic/non-academic student organizations?
3. What skills or knowledge are you gaining from your involvement in academic/non-academic student organizations that you do not gain from your classroom experience?
4. Do you believe that faculty, in general, support students' involvement in academic/non-academic student organizations? (yes,no)

5. How does your involvement in academic/non-academic student organizations impact your academic performance? (positive impact, negative impact, no impact)
  - a. Please explain your response

Even though the qualitative data were collected through a web-based method, the responses were held to the same standard of analysis as would be applied to data gathered in a naturalistic setting. Using the analysis method described by Lincoln and Guba (1985), comments were divided into distinct ideas, placed on note cards, and sorted by staff members from different units in the student affairs division who had knowledge of involvement activities referenced in the study. The sort process involved three to five staff members of the analysis team meeting for two hours each session. Two specific members of the analysis team were present for every session for consistency. During the sorting sessions, student comments were read aloud and discussed among the team members to determine the main idea. These comments and main ideas were then developed into overarching themes. During the entire analysis process, one team member was assigned to take notes and record team reflections. This allowed team members to continually revisit decisions that were made earlier in the analysis process and identify biases that might have entered the discussions. At the conclusion of the analysis process, team members reviewed all theme categories to ensure that all comments were consistent with the main idea. These analyses resulted in specific themes for each qualitative question and are highlighted within in the results section.

As part of the project, participants granted the researchers permission to collect their cumulative grade point averages from the campus database. Their grades were analyzed using a 95% confidence interval for the question regarding the impact their involvement had on their academic performance. The purpose of this analysis was to discover whether or not any relationship existed between the way the participants rated their involvement's impact for each category of organization and their actual grades. The remaining quantitative data were analyzed using frequency percentages. All quantitative data were analyzed through the software package SPSS.

## Results

According to institutional data, there were more than 200 academic student organizations and 500 non-academic student organizations available to participants during the data collection period. More than half of the study participants (52%) reported being involved only with non-academic organizations, 23% were involved only with academic organizations, and 25% were involved with both types of organizations. Academic organizations tended to have more participation from juniors and seniors than non-academic

organizations. There were no classification differences for those involved in non-academic organizations.

*Motivation to Become Involved.* Participants were asked to explain why they became involved in the specific type of student organization. Those involved in academic organizations (AO) mainly described their motivations for joining in terms of being career-driven and future-focused. Significant categories for AO participants included career development, networking opportunities, academic opportunities, and personal development. Within these categories, the participants focused on learning more about their field of study, building their resumes, connecting with students in their major, learning more about advanced degrees, and building their personal skills.

Many of the AO participants said they joined these organizations to learn more about their chosen vocational fields. A junior in a science field said he was attracted to his academic organization because “there are guest speakers in my chosen field and I am able to ask questions and learn more about the field that I am interested in.” Other AO participants were actively preparing for their future careers. One participant, a senior in agriculture, commented that she joined an academic organization because it would “help build my resume for future job prospects” while another participant, a freshman in veterinary medicine, offered, “it will help me get into veterinary school.”

In contrast, participants in non-academic organizations (NAO) focused on the present environment and immediate needs. Categories that emerged from their responses included personal development, relationships, and issues of general involvement. The themes identified in those categories included meeting new people, fulfilling their personal interests, developing a sense of belonging, finding opportunities to perform service activities, and having something to do outside of academic pursuits.

One specific intention that was addressed by NAO participants was the opportunity to meet other students. While some participants mentioned wanting to build their social connections through student organizations, others had a specific purpose in joining non-academic groups. As a sophomore engineering major explained, he joined “to have a wider scope of interaction with people who are not in my major or in engineering.” In addition to the social opportunities, many of the NAO participants described personal goals that were achieved by joining their organizations. For instance, a sophomore general studies major was “looking for an organization that provided a chance for community service” while a junior engineering major commented that non-academic organizations “make you a rounder person—perhaps more so than organizations sponsored by your college or department, as they show that you are interested in more than just engineering.”

**Persistence in Organizations.** Participants were asked to explain why they stayed involved in their student organizations. The categories that emerged from the AO participant responses included personal benefits obtained from involvement, relationships built within the organization context, and career development opportunities provided by the organization and its members. The specific themes included the fun and enjoyment obtained from organization activities, networking opportunities with members as well as those with affiliations with the organization, career benefits such as resume development and letters of recommendation that accrue through involvement, and the learning that occurs through the various activities.

Many of the AO participants cited the personal benefits they received from staying involved with their organizations. For instance, one AO participant, a sophomore agriculture major, explained: "I have learned more from this club than from the classroom." Another participant, a junior engineering major, said he stayed involved in his organization, "to become a better speaker and not as shy when talking to others." Others described the networking benefits they received, such as the senior agriculture major who said she stayed involved in order to "develop relationships with professors and staff." Outside of direct personal benefits, the AO participants also mentioned career development as a main reason they stayed involved in their organizations. One participant, a freshman business major explained, "It will look good on my resume when I am looking for jobs" while another, a junior education major, explained that her organization has "interesting guest speakers come talk about their experiences."

Similar to the responses provided by AO participants, NAO participants also focused on the personal benefits they obtained from the organizations as a main reason for their continued involvement. They also described the relationships they built within the context of their organizations and specific organizational characteristics that led them to stay involved. Within these categories, themes that emerged included the friends they made, fun and enjoyment within the organizations, personal growth opportunities, and having their expectations met by the organizations.

While the AO participants made many comments about how staying involved with organizations could benefit their future lives, NAO participants were focused on their current lives. Some stayed involved in their organizations because of the enjoyment it gave them while others cited opportunities to improve skills such as leadership as a reason to remain involved. Several participants explained why they benefited specifically from non-academic organizations. For instance, a senior agriculture major said: "Student organizations not sponsored by my college give me something to be passionate about besides my main academic concentration." Another participant, a sophomore business major shared this philosophy: "I think you also need to be

in organizations that aren't for your major. It's a way to network, make friends that aren't like the friends in all of your classes. It's really just something fun to do!"

***Benefits of Involvement.*** All participants, regardless of the organization type, explained that their involvement did result in personal benefits. There were, however, differences in what each group emphasized. AO participants again focused on their future lives. Categories emerging from their responses included career development, interpersonal relations, and the development of job skills. In particular, they explained that while involved with their organizations, they learned more about their chosen field, networked and communicated with others, and enhanced their job skills.

Most comments from the AO participants were made in reference to the field of knowledge they were gaining as a result of their organizational involvement. In describing one activity sponsored by an AO, one participant, a freshman science major, said "Speakers give us a first-hand look at their own experience as a doctor, dentist, or student in professional school." Another participant, a senior engineering major, said he now had "a better understanding of the cultures of the businesses that I will be involved with in the future." Other AO participants cited interpersonal communication as one major benefit of being involved. One participant, a junior business major, said she now enjoys "approaching new people and making conversation" as a direct result of her involvement. In terms of gains made in job-specific skills, a junior engineering major said his organization provided him with "hands on experience of what happens in the pre-flight stages of a space mission."

NAO participants, on the other hand, described development of specific skills as the main benefits of being involved in their organizations. The significant categories that emerged from the NAO responses were the development of interpersonal communication skills, leadership skills, general business skills, job specific skills, and learning more about service to others. In terms of interpersonal communication skills, a sophomore engineering major said she gained "confidence in speaking to administrators." For leadership and business skills, participants cited a variety of developmental abilities including personal responsibility, time management, and "the importance of deadlines when other people are relying on you" (sophomore liberal arts major). Another participant, a sophomore agriculture major, said she learned how to generate "my own ideas instead of mimicking a teacher" while a freshman business major explained that she learned the "importance of giving back to your community."

***Faculty Support for Organizational Involvement.*** Participants were asked if they believed that faculty, in general, supported involvement in their specific category of student organization. There was a difference in the perceptions of the participants depending on their category of student organization. Ninety-



two percent of the participants involved in academic student organizations believed the faculty were supportive of their type of organization while 79% of the participants involved in non-academic student organizations believed that faculty members were supportive of their type of organization.

***Impact of Involvement on Academic Performance.*** Participants were asked to rate how their involvement in the different types of organizations impacted their academic performance using the choices “Positive Impact,” “Negative Impact,” and “No Impact.” Almost half of the AO participants (49%) indicated their involvement had no impact on their academic performance. Another 46% noted that it had a positive impact and 5% believed it had a negative impact. Half of the NAO participants (50%) reported their involvement in organizations had a positive impact on their academic performance while 39% thought it had no impact. Eleven percent believed that their involvement had a negative impact on academic performance. Cumulative grade point averages were compared to see if any actual differences existed between the different types of organizations and their participants. Using a 95% confidence interval for analysis, no differences were found between AO participants (3.06 to 3.25) and NAO participants (3.00 to 3.16).

All participants were asked to explain why they chose their specific academic impact rating for their organization involvement. Categories emerging from both groups were similar. Time management was the largest category for both groups. Participants who believed involvement in their organizations had a positive impact on time management issues mainly explained that having a lot of responsibilities caused them to focus on planning and following a schedule. Others believed involvement had a negative impact for reasons such as the one offered by a junior engineering major involved in an AO: “It takes time away from my studies. In other words, it takes away from my time that could be spent studying.” One NAO participant, a freshman agriculture major, admitted that she was “more passionate about my organization than my schoolwork, much of the time” and that her involvement had a negative impact on her academic performance. Participants who believed their involvement had no impact on their academic performance explained that they did not spend a lot of time with their organizations or placed a priority on academic responsibilities over organization activities so there was never a conflict.

Another category addressed by both groups was the relationship between organization responsibilities and academics. Most of the participants believed their involvement had a positive impact on academic performance because these organizations required minimum grade standards for membership, both initial and sustained, and that they supported and emphasized studying, sometimes even requiring study hours from members. AO participants also noted that their organization activities reminded them of their future goals and

provided motivation to perform well academically. As one AO member described, “Going to meetings changes my perspective and continually reminds me of why I work as hard as I do in my classes—because I want to pursue a career and be successful” (junior veterinary medicine major). The few participants who thought involvement had a negative impact on academic performance explained that organizations could distract from the tasks they should have been working on for class. Another small group of participants reported that their involvement had no impact on academic performance because they were two separate issues. As an AO member explained: “My grades come only from my own work, and no other source” (senior engineering major).

Relationships built through the organizations was a final theme for participants from both groups. Participants explained that their academic performance was positively impacted because they found study partners or peers who had previously taken courses and could provide advice on what to expect. Outside of the direct impact peers could have on their academic performance, the participants focused on different benefits they obtained from organizational relationships. NAO participants described the emotional support and encouragement they gained from their peers. One participant, a junior science major, explained how she specifically benefited from her relationships in a non-academic organization: “Being involved with the organizations has allowed me to have a support system that has encouraged me at times when I sorely needed it; my major is very cutthroat, and other students will often say or do things that attempt to harm other people’s academics (i.e., tell you the test is on the wrong day, tell you wrong instructions for your experiments, make remarks like you know you really don’t have the characteristics to be a doctor, dentist, etc.)” AO participants, on the other hand, cited the academic assistance they acquired from the faculty and staff members associated with the organization. As one AO member indicated, “By getting involved I have been able to get to know my professors on a one on one basis. This helps me when I have a problem: I can talk to the professor and not feel intimidated” (junior engineering major).

### Discussion

College students who become involved in academic organizations seem to have a different orientation than those who join non-academic organizations. The academic organizations attracted students who had a future orientation and sought preparation for their eventual careers. They were searching for field-specific knowledge, connections with others who could assist them along their path, and experiences to add to a resume. By contrast, the students involved with non-academic student organizations had a present orientation and sought experiences that would contribute to their overall college experience such as

meeting people and making friends, fulfilling personal interests and hobbies, and finding opportunities outside of academic pursuits.

While the students had different motivations for joining the different types of organizations, they shared a similar overall reason for persisting in their involvement—their expectations were met. Even the skills and knowledge they acquired through their involvement echoed their initial goals of joining the organizations. Students in academic organizations said they increased their overall career development and job related skills while those in non-academic organizations reported enhancing a variety of general talents such as leadership and communication.

The explanations of participants' involvement and its influence on academic performance followed a similar pattern. Students in academic organizations described positive impacts in the form of meeting peers who could help them study, having a constant reminder of what they were working towards in their future career goals, obtaining knowledge of their field, and networking with faculty and staff in their academic units. Students in non-academic organizations also described positive impacts but focused on their college lives by citing the friendships made within the organizations, the personal development that occurred while involved, and the requirement of some organizations that members have good grades to maintain their membership. There seemed to be some differences in how each group viewed faculty support of organizations. Those involved in academic student organizations were more positive that faculty members were supportive of their endeavors compared to students involved in non-academic student organizations.

The findings of this study have implications regarding how college administrators direct students towards involvement opportunities and how those opportunities are structured. Some students clearly want their involvement activities to prepare them for the future while others need opportunities to assist them with a sense of belonging and general learning while in college. Becoming involved at a level which meets their needs is integral to students' development and growth because they are more likely to be active in these organizations. The more active they are, the more effort they put into their experience and the more likely they are to persist in college and be successful post-graduation.

While most campuses have a diverse array of organizations for students to join, the process by which these organizations are offered is usually a one-size-fits-all presentation. For instance, a common practice is for campuses to offer an involvement fair that allows organizations to recruit new members. These fairs provide organizations with tables to display materials, and interested students can peruse the information and talk with current members. However, students can feel overwhelmed by the choices and have trouble selecting appropriate organizations to meet their needs and interests. Ideally, these events should be

improved by having each organization develop –and assess- learning outcomes to help explain what students will gain from their involvement. This explicit statement of skills and knowledge could help students better identify how their involvement will benefit them either while in college or in their future goals. This information, once created, should be provided online as well so students have continual access to this important data as their interests and needs change over time.

Another possible way to address the differences between student organizations and how to best match students to involvement activities is to assign specific administrators to different categories of organizations, such as academic organizations or service-oriented organizations. These administrators could serve as consultants, and would have at least minimal knowledge about the general purpose of all the organizations in their category. This list of staff consultants and their contact information could be provided to academic advisors who could then easily point students to knowledgeable resources.

Student organization advisors are also a viable group to effectively direct students towards involvement opportunities. For example, advisors can help identify students who are minimally active in the organizations they advise and engage those students about their needs. It may be that the organizations are not meeting students' needs. Directing them towards other organizations or finding a way to engage them in the current organization's activities could help the students discover a way to fulfill their needs. These staff members also have the influence over student organizations to incorporate new activities that address the different needs of students. For instance, an academic organization can be expanded to provide additional social activities that can help members find a sense of belonging while in college rather than focusing solely on career development activities. Conversely, non-academic organizations can incorporate career building activities such as resume writing into their regular activities to help address career issues.

In addition, student organization advisors can purposefully adjust their advising styles to complement their students' involvement orientation. Academic organization advisors, for instance, might center their conversations with students on college adjustment issues since the career activities will be addressed through organizational business. Non-academic organization advisors could adapt their communication with students to question them about career goals and how they plan to meet them in the future.

This study is important because it sheds light on why students join specific organizations and what the different types of organizations can offer students. It is important for administrators, and even student leaders, to begin identifying how each organization can contribute to student development rather than just accepting that involvement for involvement's sake is good. What outcomes do different student organizations provide that are useful? Are

there specific skill sets or information that students learn through involvement in different types of organizations? Capturing this information, sharing it with students, and assessing whether or not learning is occurring within each student organization is an essential task for institutions of higher education concerned about integrative learning.

### Limitations and Future Research

Though the findings of this study provide an introductory glimpse into the motivation to join different types of organizations, gains received through participation, and the academic impact of participation, the single institution sample limits the transferability of the results. The institution in question enjoys a high rate of campus involvement from its students which may have impacted the responses from participants. The institution is also predominantly White which limits the exploration of how this issue might impact students of color. Furthermore, women constituted two-thirds of the study respondents even though they represent only half of the campus undergraduate population. Their dominant voices in this study may have eclipsed the true male involvement experience. The study was also limited because the overall cumulative grade point average of the sample was higher than the campus average (3.09 versus 2.89). It may be that the participants in this study fell into the category of high achievers and their views may not accurately reflect the experience of average achievers. Finally, no examination is made of the students who join both types of organizations.

The literature is clear that cocurricular involvement positively impacts student development (Astin, 1993; Foubert & Grainger, 2006; Graham & Gisi, 2000; Huang & Chang, 2004; Kuh et al., 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). What we do not know is how different types of involvement affect student development. It is important for college administrators to understand the benefits of specific activities and organizations so they can better direct students to involvement opportunities that match specific needs. Future research could explore the relationship between specific skill sets such as critical thinking and student involvement activities.

There also could be an exploration of how involvement in other types of organizations such as service groups, Greek societies, student governments, and athletic or recreational groups impacts students. Do students who join and persist in these organizations have a different involvement orientation than students in academic organizations? Discovering the involvement orientations of students in other organizational categories would further illuminate the different needs that could be addressed by campus administrators.

Another line of research might involve relating these findings to Holland's theory of vocational choice, which holds that an individual's job vocation is an expression of personality (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998). Are there

certain personality types that naturally gravitate towards AO involvement? Alternately, are students who joined NAOs fulfilling their vocational interests in some other manner? And in terms of advising opportunities, do students involved in NAOs need specific guidance on applying their experiences to their career goals? Do these students understand how to market their specific skills within the context of a job search?

Future research should address whether or not involvement orientations are affected by different levels of engagement in the organization. For instance, do officers have a stronger involvement orientation than regular members? By exploring the nuances of these findings, administrators can assist come to a greater understanding of how specific types of activities affect students and how administrators can assist students in finding the right activities for their individual needs.

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