

Student Participation in Collegiate Organizations – Expanding the Boundaries

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Extracurricular organizations are beneficial to college students. They help bring students and faculty together, let students interact in a non-formal atmosphere, and allow students to strengthen their leadership and communications skills. These are at least what books, articles, and advisors will tell you, but what do the students actually think about these organizations?

Researchers say that with a higher education comes leaders (Stogdill, 1959) and that educational attainment was a key indicator of an individual's leadership ability (Birkenholz, R., McKinley, and Stewart 1993). Again, these statements cover what makes leaders, not what drives students to participate in organizations, a high factor for the college experience.

The closest research statistic available to us is from the Birkenholz study in 1993. This study came to several conclusions about leadership, one specifically geared towards participation in student organizations and activities. It states: "Communications skills of College of Agriculture students are enhanced through participation in student organizations and activities."

In today's society, employers are hiring students more on what they can do, not their grade point average. Participating in extracurricular organizations shows future employers that students can handle school, work, and other activities, which in turn shows responsibility and organization. Do students really understand this?

In order to begin this study with an open mind, we came up with the following null hypotheses:

1. Gender has no effect on whether students do or do not participate.
2. Grade Point Average has no significance in whether a student will or will not participate in organizations.
3. Grade level does not affect the participation level of students in organizations.
4. Major does not affect student involvement in undergraduate organizations.

Purpose and Objectives

Expanding leadership boundaries is important in personal growth. As part of the University of Arizona's College of Agriculture and Life Sciences (CALS), we wanted to identify means to expand leadership boundaries for students in undergraduate

organizations offered at the University of Arizona's CALS. The objectives of this study were to:

1. Describe the current involvement of undergraduates in student organizations at the University of Arizona, CALS.
2. Describe why students do and do not participate in undergraduate student organizations at the University of Arizona, CALS.
3. Define the characteristics that are most highly correlated with participation in student organizations.
4. Identify strategies for improving student participation in undergraduate student organizations.

Methods

Design: The design of this study was of non-experimental survey-type, based on a Likert scale. There were 31 questions that were asked of the students that reflected their characteristics as to why they do and do not join undergraduate organizations. In addition, fill-in-the-blank type questions were used to gain the following information:

- Age
- Gender
- Class
- Major
- Overall GPA
- Extracurricular organizations involved in during college

The nominal variables of this study were the fill-in-the-blank type questions mentioned above.

Sample: The sample consisted of students enrolled in CALS classes offered in the spring semester 2002. The classes that were randomly chosen, consisted of the following:

- Soils and Water Science 316
- Agriculture Resources and Economics 377
- Agricultural Technology Management 350
- Agricultural Technology Management 432
- Agricultural Education 462
- Agricultural Education 195
- Agricultural Education 297
- Applied Biological Engineering 120

All surveys handed out were completed, however, 50 were invalid due to the requirements of class and major. Only undergraduate students and CALS students were allowed to participate. A total of 95 students were surveyed.

Instrumentation: The survey for this study was produced by a panel of experts from CALS whom reviewed studies and questionnaires, the most helpful being the Schumacher (1990) survey for college students. The questions used were created according to the panel's previous knowledge of undergraduate organizations, specifically geared to why students do and do not participate.

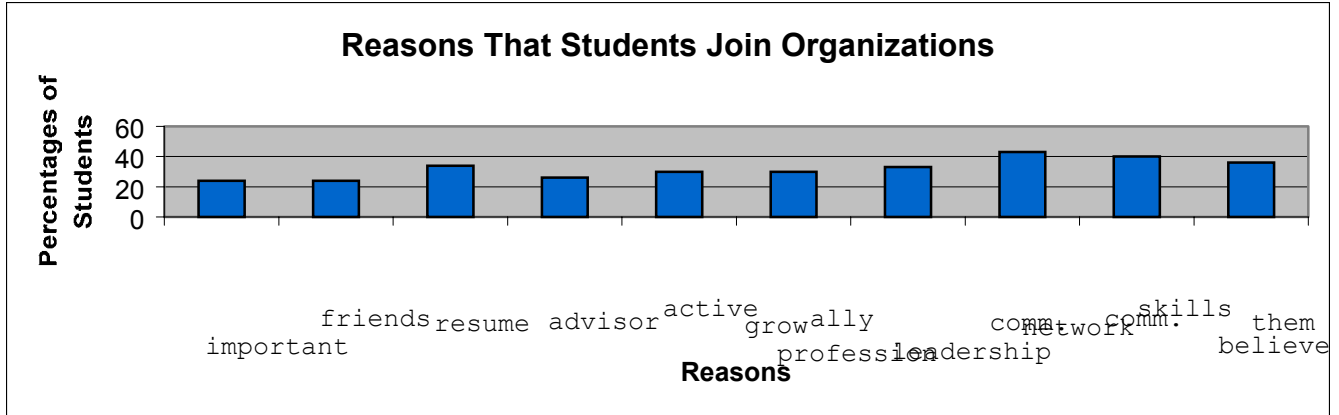
Data Collection and Analysis: The data received from the surveys was compiled in to a SPSS computer program. This data was then reported as descriptive statistics from correlations and frequencies. The significance of the data was determined by a nominal-by-nominal Cramer's V with a beginning significance the .05 level.

Results

Objective 1: Of those surveyed, 75.8% said that they are involved in extracurricular organizations. This involvement is quite high for the college, thus we analyzed questions to find out why these students participate at such a high level (see objective 2).

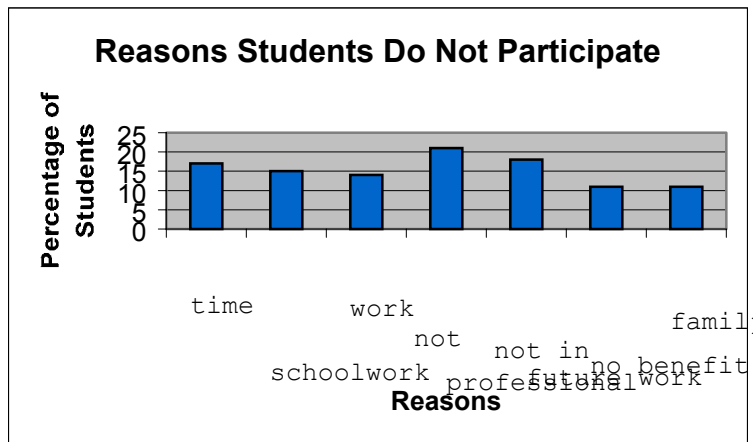
Objective 2: In order to answer this question simplistically, we broke the survey down into questions reflecting answers of why students do and do not join. The following are reasons that students join, all are the largest valid percent (see graph):

- 24% stated that they strongly agree that belonging to organizations is important to them.
- 24% stated that they slightly agree that they join organizations because their friends are in them.
- 34% stated that they slightly agree that they join organizations because organizations look good on their resume.
- 26% strongly disagree that they join organizations because their advisor urged them to.
- 30% strongly disagree that they participate in organizations, but are not active.
- 30% moderately agree that joining organizations helps them to grow professionally.
- 66% agree that joining organizations helps them to strengthen leadership skills.
- 43% strongly agree that joining organizations helps them to build a greater communications network.
- 40% strongly agree that joining organizations helps them to strengthen their communications skills.
- 36% strongly agree that they join organizations because they believe in what they stand for.



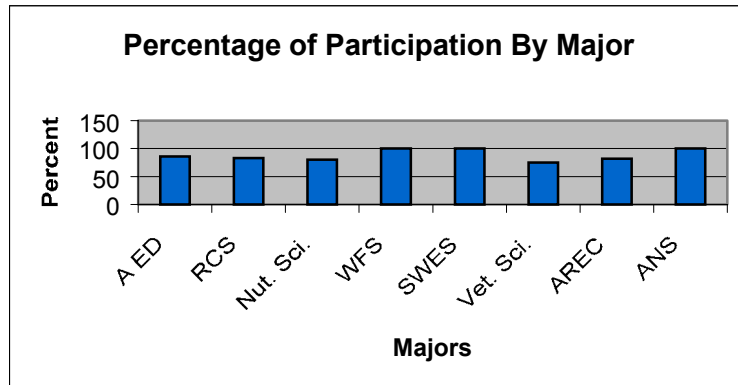
On the other hand, the following are reasons students do not join organizations (see graph):

- 17% strongly agree that they do not join organizations because they do not have time.
- 15% strongly agree that they do not join organizations because they are too busy with schoolwork.
- 14% strongly agree that they do not join because they have to work.
- 21% slightly agree that they do not think that the offered organizations are professional enough.
- 18% slightly agree that the offered organizations do not adhere to their future work.
- 11% do not think that the offered organizations benefit them in any way.
- 11% do not join organizations because of other family obligations.

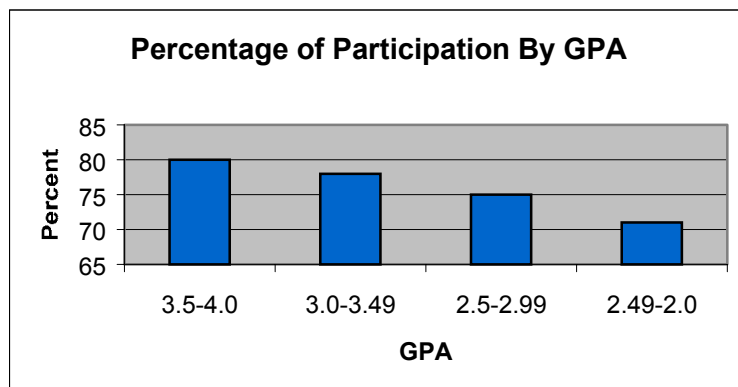


Objective 3: The characteristics of the students that do participate are quite clear. The answers to this objective started with the fill-in-the-blank type questions. We were able to disprove all of our null-hypotheses.

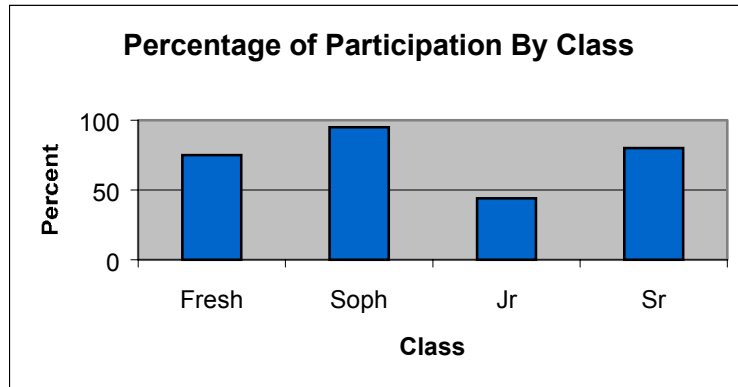
- Major: There is clearly a difference in those that do and do not participate according to major. The approximate significance to this correlation was .619, clearly showing a correlation. The majors that participated above 75% (the current involvement at the CALS in extracurricular organizations) were: agricultural education, 86%, Retail and Consumer Sciences, 83%, Nutritional Sciences, 80%, Wildlife and Fisheries Sciences, 100%, Soil and Water Sciences, 100%, Veterinary Sciences, 75% Agricultural Resource and Economics, 82%, and Animal Sciences, 100%.



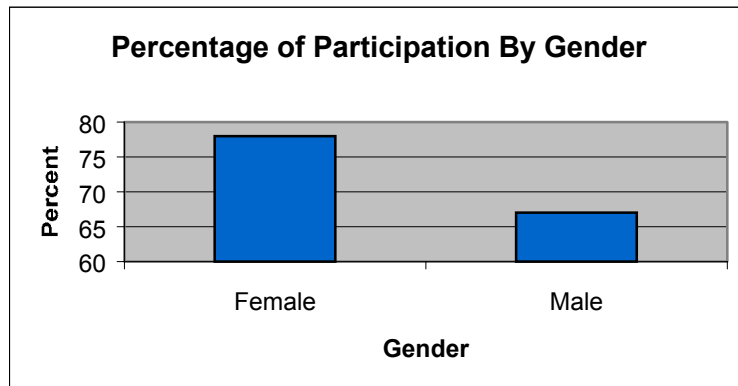
- Grade Point Average: The correlation between GPA and participation was great, again, disproving our null hypothesis. The significance for this correlation was .585, again showing importance. Our results show that students who have a GPA of 3.50 to 4.0 have an 80% participation rate, compared to GPAs of 3.0 to 3.49, 78% participation rate, 2.5 to 2.99, 75%, and 2.0 to 2.49, 71%.



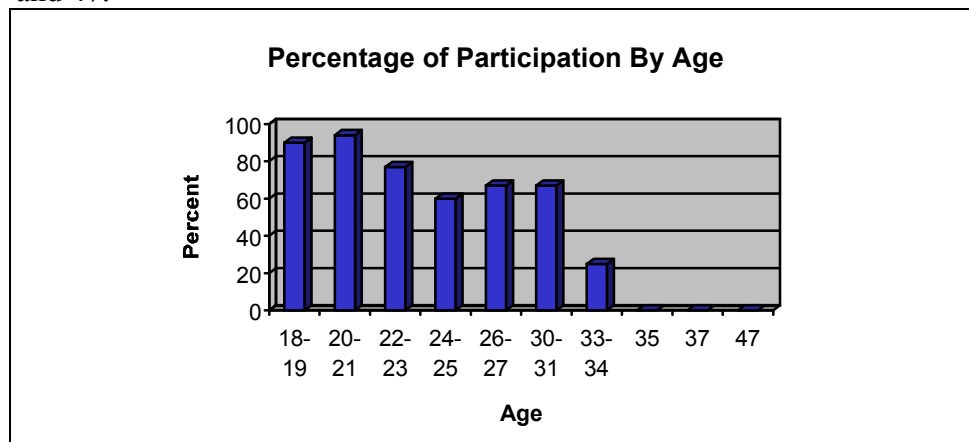
- Class: Our null hypothesis wanted to disprove that grade level made no difference in participation. This survey did disprove this. The significance for this correlation great, at .004. Our results reflect that sophomores are the most active with 95% participation rate. Juniors were the least active with a 44% participation rate.



- Gender: The relationship between gender and participation was again seen and did disprove our null hypotheses. It showed that females have a participation rate of 78% compared to males whose participation is 67%.



- Age: There is a high significance between age and participation, an approximate value of .014. The younger the undergraduate is in age, the higher the participation level. Our results show that the highest participation level age-wise is between the ages of 18 and 21. The lowest participation is between the ages 35 and 47.



Objective 4:

After reviewing the statistics of our survey, we have concluded six ways to improve the participation level in undergraduate organizations. They are the following:

- ✓ Undergraduate organizations need to have their meetings and activities when it is convenient for its potential members. Some of the reasons students do not join organizations is because they do not have the time either due to work or school. Making the meetings in the morning or during lunch may attract more members. Another idea is to have posted meeting minutes available on the Internet. This will keep members informed of the happenings at the meetings that way if they miss one they can get caught up and can know new dates of activities.
- ✓ Undergraduate organizations should try to be more professional. Some of the potential members that they are missing are those that are older than most college students (30 or older in age) and do not want to be at meetings that are disorderly or unimportant. Meetings should be quick and to the point, increasing professionalism and keeping the time factor in mind.
- ✓ All majors need to have something to belong to whether it is the Soil and Water Science Club or CALS Ambassadors.
- ✓ Undergraduate organizations should recruit members that have trouble in school; those with GPAs lower than 2.5. This may allow them to become more involved in school work and will help them to meet others in their major that can guide them to understanding their school work and increase their communications network.
- ✓ It must be emphasized to upperclassman that participating in undergraduate organizations is important in personal growth and leadership.
- ✓ Though some students are older in age, we, as a college, need to target them and make them feel needed.

Conclusion

Objective 1: After analyzing the information provided by the student surveys, it is clear that the University of Arizona's CALS is quite active in the offered student organizations. It is suggested that in a later study more students should be surveyed to be absolutely sure that this participation rate is correct.

Objective 2: When correlating the reasons students do and do not participate in extracurricular organizations, our results came out quite significant. In addition, it is what most people expected. Students participate in organizations to improve their communications skills and enlarge their communications network. The number one reason students do not participate is because of the lack of time. These results are new because they have been proven scientifically, but are what the collegiate population hypothesized.

Objective 3: These results are most helpful when answering objective 4: What strategies can be implemented to improve student participation. The result that was most

astonishing to us was that the students that are most active are sophomores. In our mind, we thought that freshmen would be more active because they are trying to find their niche in college. In resurveying the students, we might want to, again, sample a larger population because the significance of this finding was not too high.

Objective 4: When examining our findings, the strategies that need to be implemented into college programs are quite clear. Though this study was small, we had some pretty strong findings with large significances. These are results from major, GPA, age, and the results from objective 2.

Discussion

This study could be used for other studies in College of Agriculture and Life Sciences across the nation. It might be interesting to see:

- What organizations are students most involved in?
- What organizations do students want to be more active?
- What intercollegiate activities do students enjoy most?

References

Birkenholz, R., McKinley, and Stewart (1993). Characteristics and Experiences Related to the Leadership Skills of Agriculture Students in College. University of Missouri-Columbia.

Schumacher, L. (1990). Perceived leadership abilities of students enrolled in the college of agriculture (Survey Instrument). Fargo: North Dakota State University.

Stogdill, R.M. (1959). Individual behavior and group achievement. New York: Oxford University Press.