
Students' Experiences and Outcomes from Participation in an Extracurricular Club

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Abstract

Student involvement in extracurricular activities has the potential to contribute to a variety of valued college outcomes. The purpose of this study was to understand the outcomes associated with recreation students' participation in the Professional Golf Management Student Association, as well as the experiences that contributed to those outcomes, using qualitative research. Four major themes that represented the experiences and outcomes of student involvement emerged from in-depth interviews. These themes suggested students had their needs for relatedness, self-determination, competence, and enjoyment met through their club involvement. All students reported that their club involvement contributed to their sense of belonging and identification with their peers and academic program. The students, especially those involved in club leadership roles, believed they could make a difference in the success of their club, academic program, and community through their club involvement and that they were also developing important interpersonal and professional skills. Finally, the students reported that involvement in the association contributed to the enjoyment of their academic program and the creation of meaningful memories.

KEYWORDS: Experiences, outcomes, relationships, student association

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Student involvement in extracurricular activities has the potential to contribute to a variety of valued college outcomes (e.g., satisfaction, competence, persistence, grades). Recent research has confirmed these findings while also deepening our understanding. Foubert and Grainger (2006) found that involvement in student clubs and organizations positively affected the psychosocial development of students. Further, they found that sophomores who had been involved in clubs and organizations during their first year showed more development in academic autonomy and lifestyle planning than those sophomores who were less involved. Similarly, Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, and Gonyea (2008) found that student engagement in purposeful extracurricular activity during their freshman year was positively associated with grades and persistence in both the first and second years of college.

Research has also examined the relationship between the goals of the university and student involvement in extracurricular activity. Musil (2003) noted that universities have identified the civic development of students as a desired outcome and have incorporated it into institutional missions and strategic plans. Rowan-Kenyon, Soldner, and Inkelas (2007) studied students' involvement in community service activities and found that the experience positively predicted their sense of civic engagement.

One area that has had limited research is the outcomes that students experience from formal leadership roles in clubs (Hall-Yannessa & Forrester, 2005; Shertzer & Schuh, 2004). Hall, Forrester, and Borsz (2008) addressed this research gap and found that students involved in campus sport club leadership roles (i.e., president) enhanced their self-confidence and ability for self-reflection on their experience. Self-reflection has been noted as one of the essential developmental influences of leadership (Komives, Longersbeam, Owen, Mainella, & Osteen, 2005).

Universities have a compelling role to play in engaging students in meaningful experiences through extracurricular clubs. These learning communities can influence a range of behaviors through designed programmatic experiences (Zhao & Kuh, 2004). In addition, the benefits for students may extend beyond graduation. In the U.K., Tchibozo (2007) found extracurricular involvement assisted students in the successful transition from higher education to the workplace. Extracurricular involvement may be most successful in transitioning students when they perceive the activities as relevant academic experiences (Derous & Ryan, 2008). The nature of the experience and its meaning for students are critical (Tchibozo, 2007).

Extracurricular activities complement academic programs and provide beneficial outcomes for students and universities. Recreation degree programs offer students a wide range of student clubs that reflect the diversity of the field. However, there has been little research conducted to understand the outcomes of club involvement for students in recreation programs. Further, little research has been conducted on the experiences of students involved in the clubs or the meanings of those experiences to the students. Research on the involvement of students in extracurricular activities has been dominated by quantitative approaches. Qualitative research allows for the discovery of a "story line" and understanding the phenomenon from the perspective of the individuals living the experience (Creswell, 1998). The purpose of this study was to understand students' experiences and outcomes from participation in an extracurricular club.

Method

Setting

The first and most global decision—choosing a setting, site, population, or phenomenon of interest—is fundamental to the design of the study and serves as a guide for the researcher (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). The phenomena of interest for this study were the experiences and outcomes of students who were members of a Professional Golf Management Student Association (PGMSA). All golf management programs or concentrations that are accredited by the PGA of America are required to provide the opportunity for students to establish a student club or association. Currently, all PGA-accredited programs provide student associations. The student association is an extracurricular activity intended to contribute to students' academic, professional, and personal development. However, the facilitation of these clubs can be resource intensive; therefore, it is important to assess the outcomes associated with club involvement. However, to date, no research has explored the outcomes associated with involvement in a PGMSA.

The PGMSA that was investigated through this research is dedicated to improving the quality of life and academic and professional opportunities offered to students in the Professional Golf Management (PGM) concentration. All students in the PGM concentration are required to become members of this PGMSA when they are admitted to the concentration; membership dues are \$80.00 per year. The PGMSA provides students with the opportunity to meet monthly as a group to conduct student association business, share information, and host guest speakers. It also provides a forum for all PGM students to openly discuss relevant association governance issues they deem important for the PGM concentration. The PGMSA was led by a board of directors consisting of six officers of the executive board (e-board), as well as four additional members that each represented an academic class (freshman, sophomore, junior, senior). The student executive board governs all facets of the student association. In addition to serving as association leaders, members conduct fundraising activities, organize and participate in social events, implement PGMSA tournaments and leagues, and engage in community outreach activities. The association has over 90 members ranging in ages from 18 to 34.

The participants in this study were students enrolled in a recreation major with a PGM concentration at a large southwestern university. The PGM program was housed within a Department of Recreation and Sport Management. This administrative structure is not atypical. Recreation departments administer 20% of all PGM programs in the country, and the students earn a recreation degree.

Purposive sampling was used to identify the study participants. The research team believed that students' PGMSA experiences and the outcomes associated with their involvement might be influenced by their class standing and length of association involvement. Therefore, the director and internship coordinator of the PGM concentration were each asked to identify students currently majoring in recreation with a concentration in PGA golf management, their year in school, and their level of involvement in the PGMSA. Students that were involved in association leadership positions were categorized as highly involved. Students who attended meetings and some events, but were not involved on the e-board or committees, were considered less involved.

Students were asked to participate in the study by the second author via a letter that was sent to their campus email address. The email letter described the nature of the study and stated that participation was entirely voluntary. The second author had no authority over the students invited to participate in the study. Students highly involved or less involved from each grade level were invited to participate in the study. Initially, one highly involved student, as well as one less involved student, was selected from each academic class. The second author continued to invite students to participate in the study until data saturation was reached. Data saturation was reached when additional interviews did not contribute substantively to the further understanding of the students' experiences in the association and were becoming repetitive. The researchers obtained prior approval for the study from the university's Institutional Review Board. After the second author provided an explanation of the study, each participant signed an informed consent form.

All of the students invited agreed to participate in the study. Eleven students were interviewed. Six of the students had served on the student association board of directors as either an executive board member or class representative. The five remaining students attended some association functions, such as the monthly association meetings and events. Two of the students were female. All students were given male pseudonyms to protect their anonymity.

In order to understand the experiences of the students in the association and the perceived impact of the experiences, the researchers used a qualitative methodology. A qualitative researcher "builds a complex, holistic picture, analyzes words, and reports detailed views of informants" (Creswell, 1998, p. 15). Specifically, the authors conducted a grounded theory study through which they attempted to understand a phenomenon and allowed the theoretical explanation for the relationships among concepts and sets of concepts to emerge (Creswell, 1998; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Creswell (1998) wrote that the intent of a grounded theory study is to generate or discover a theory, an abstract analytical schema of a phenomenon, which relates to a particular situation.

Data Collection

Data-collection procedures included in-depth, semi-structured interviews with PGMSA students. Participation was completely voluntary. Data were collected over a four-week period by the first author, who conducted and audiorecorded all of the interviews. Qualitative, in-depth interviews are typically much more like conversations than formal events with predetermined response categories (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). At the beginning of the interviews, the students were directed to focus only on the PGMSA, and to try to separate it, as much as possible, from their other academic experiences. The interviews began with an invitation to the students to talk about their involvement with the PGMSA and if that involvement changed over time. They were asked if they thought they had been impacted in any way as a result of their involvement in the association. When the students identified ways in which they had changed, probes were used to pursue a deeper understanding of the ways in which they had changed, as well as the depth of the impact. For instance, if students indicated that they had acquired leadership skills, they were asked what they meant by leadership skills and to provide examples. Each interview lasted approximately 45 - 75 minutes.

Clarification and elaboration were encouraged through the use of probes and active listening. Qualitative researchers generally have higher degrees of interaction with subjects, which produces more honest and in-depth responses. Students were told that the purpose of the study was to understand their experiences in the association and they should be completely candid and honest in their responses.

Data Analysis

Qualitative research allows for the discovery of a “story line” and understanding the phenomenon from the perspective of the individuals living the experience (Creswell, 1998). As recommended by Creswell (1998), data analysis was conducted simultaneously with data collection. The intention of this study was to understand students' experiences and outcomes from participation in an extracurricular club.

A research assistant transcribed the audiotaped individual interviews. The process of data analysis applied in this study is used in grounded theory research; it is systematic and follows a standard format (Creswell, 1998). There is a three-step process that includes open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Open coding, a line-by-line analysis of the responses to the interviews was used to identify words or phrases related to the experiences and perceived impact of involvement in the association. Axial coding was used to identify similarities among coded words or phrases in order to aggregate themes in the data (Creswell, 1998). A constant comparative technique was used to compare emerging topics and themes with the topics and themes that were present in the previously analyzed data (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Constant comparison is an analytical induction method where the researcher looks for key issues or recurrent events in the data and identifies categories while working through the data and coding based on core categories (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Finally, selective coding was used to identify a “story line” that integrated the categories theoretically.

In this study, the first author and a second research assistant with expertise in qualitative methods independently coded the data and identified consistent themes related to student experiences and the outcomes associated with those experiences. After each interview was independently coded and the themes were identified, the second research assistant and first author identified similarities in the themes that were emerging and discussed any areas of divergence. There was great consistency in the themes identified originally by the first author and the second research assistant; differences were readily reconciled through discussion. To enhance the trustworthiness of the interpretation of the data, after the first author and second research assistant analyzed the data from all of the interviews, the first research assistant who had transcribed the original data reviewed the themes generated through this data-analysis process. Again, any differences between the themes identified by the research assistant who had transcribed the data and the themes generated during the original analysis conducted by the first author and second research assistant were reconciled until everyone concurred that the themes identified accurately captured the students' perceptions of the outcomes of their experiences with the student association.

Results

Four themes emerged from the data reflecting the experiences and outcomes associated with involvement in the PGMSA. Overall, the data suggested that the association provided students with a sense of relatedness, self-determination, competence, and enjoyment. There were many quotes to support each of the themes reported by the students. Direct quotes taken from the interviews are provided to illustrate the students' perceptions of the impact of their involvement in the student association. In the students' comments below, they typically use the word "program" to refer to the PGM academic concentration in the recreation major.

Theme 1: Relatedness

Regardless of the level of involvement with the club, the students unanimously mentioned the strong role of the student association in the creation and maintenance of important relationships. The students discussed the contributions of the association to their sense of belonging, level of involvement, identity, support, feelings of being part of a family, and professional networking. Some students reflected upon the challenges to the maintenance of the association's cohesion, as well as the downside of the cohesion.

Upon their arrival on campus, the student association provided students with immediate connections on campus helping them feel welcome. Pete reported, "two of my best four best friends down here, I met them at the first student association meeting." Shawn stated, "It helped me to feel welcome. If we didn't have the association, we would definitely lose a lot of the cohesion that we have as students. It would be a lot harder for freshmen students to get acclimated to the program..."

The student association provided early friendships for students that were the bridge to ever expanding friendships. Pete stated,

I've had the same friends from literally kindergarten. I ended up getting involved with the people who were involved [in the student association]. The upperclassmen were having us over to their house consistently ...and, you know, that's how you build the social bond. We're 'let's have some fun and get to know each other and build' stories.

New students were socialized into deeper engagement with the association through these new peer relationships. Many of the students discussed their relationships with other students and the student association leadership upon entering the program as a bridge to the deepening of their own association involvement. Todd stated,

It's helped that the upperclassmen have grabbed me and brought me in and said there's a lot of potential here and you should definitely take pride in this because the people before you have taken pride in this and created this for you. That's why you came here because you found out that this is a very good program, so keep it going...

Kendall's involvement was shaped by a more formal involvement in the mentorship program. Kendall's mentee relationship with the student association president inspired him to get more involved in the association. He stated,

I think that the mentorship program came in, into play, because my mentor was Damon. He was [association] vice-president at the time and I was a freshman. Then as a sophomore, I saw him as president and he kinda inspired me to get involved, and you know I saw that and, I wanna do that, I wanna be president one day.

The association provided many of the students with a sense of identity. According to John, "It's been my identity. It's been my college experience. So my friends, I have other friends outside of the program, but the bulk of my friends, the bulk of my experiences, come from being involved in the student association." Pete spoke about his feelings that to be a part of the association connected him to something bigger than himself, "It is a huge pride. It is something that not a lot of people, they're not a part of anything. To be a part of anything is cool, let alone an association that's going to let you bloom... You know, I mean, it's phenomenal."

Almost all of the students spoke of the support and closeness that they shared with the other students as the primary outcome of association involvement. Pete alluded to the academic support and encouragement that he received from his peers in the association by saying,

"We're all working towards a common goal, helping each other along the way ... reminding each other of quizzes and tests, papers due. I mean, it's that big brother sort of experience that you've got, because they can help you out." Other students reinforced the notion of the association as family. Craig remarked that "Being part of that [association] makes me walk a little taller, because you know, it's kind of like a brotherhood here. ... If I wasn't part of it, school just wouldn't mean as much to me." According to John, if there were no student association, "We would lose the soul of what we are about. That's all we preach to students who come in. We're a family."

While the majority of the students focused on the primary outcome of association membership as creating valued relationships with peers, a number of them mentioned enhanced relationships with professionals and faculty. Craig stated, "It's [association] definitely emphasized the importance of networking, like how important it is to leave a lasting impression on the person that you might be getting a job from someday or just needing assistance down the road. Networking has been a big focus." Kendall believed that

Through my involvement in the association, my relationship with [faculty director] has definitely changed. I think he sees me more as someone who is a leader in the program, so he takes the time to sit down with me. He's there for me, and, you know, we go hang out at his house for the passing of the torch. I have gotten to know him on a more personal level...

Quinton stated that the association provided "face time" with the PGM faculty and that they are "like your dad, but not your dad. Your dad on the college side... they are always there for you."

Although most of the students perceived that group cohesion was positive, a number of the students expressed concern that the social dynamic could contribute to negative outcomes. Craig alluded to the fact that one's peers within the association could either encourage greater involvement or undermine it. He stated, "For me, it was kind of

a group thing that everyone stepped back. The people that were in the core [involved] group of friends that I hang out with all the time, they got jobs; they got girlfriends. It seems like it was a group thing that we kind of fell off big time.”

James described how peer networks contributed to a recent precipitous drop in participation in association events, including attendance at monthly meetings, I think a lot of it just has to do with the individuals. Because it only takes a couple bad apples to spoil the bunch. If you have people who are downplaying or talking bad about things they were involved in, then its definitely going to demotivate anyone else from participating in those in the future.

Additionally, the cohesiveness of the relationships itself may have a downside for those on the outside of those relationships. One of the female students recently elected vice-president of the association had not felt a strong sense of inclusion her freshman year. In fact, she had left the PGM program after her freshman year and returned to the PGM program her junior year. When she returned, she felt more connected to her student cohort. According to the student,

Everyone kind of forms their cliques; I guess that was kind of my problem freshman year, too, is I just didn't find a clique that I fit in with I guess. ...the mentorship program, that was pretty detrimental for me also because I felt like if my mentor was supposed to be there for me and he wasn't, that's how the association would be.

John spoke also of the danger of becoming too cohesive as a group. He stated, “The dangers of having a really cohesive group is when you start getting new classes in there and you start looking at them as outsiders, like that's where the real danger is.”

Theme 2: Self –Determination/Empowerment

Although all of the students were of the opinion that association involvement enhanced their sense of relatedness to the other students and their academic program, the students who had been highly involved as members of the association's executive board (e-board) were most likely to articulate a strong sense of self-determination and empowerment also. Executive board involvement appears to be the primary path to self-determination and empowerment through the association. The students spoke of their sense of ownership, the belief that they are carrying on the legacy of former students and leaving a legacy for future students, while making a positive impact on the community. Most of the students in the association believed that their academic PGM concentration is one of the most prestigious programs in the country (U.S.) and they either helped build it or are responsible for improving it. They had a strong sense of ownership and responsibility. According to John, “...through the association, students realize that they have a voice. ...what we can change is the events that we have, how the money that we raise gets spent, the experiences that we create on a personal level for our students, and the family atmosphere. That's created by students.” James spoke also of the importance of the sense of ownership,

...To have that sense of ownership, where you have students in the association, students running the association, maintaining or making the association better. There's definitely that sense of ownership that you want to kind of work together and make it as good as you can, rather than sit back and hold

your hands out and expect somebody to feed you everything. It's been a good experience.

Because so many of the upperclassmen were among the first members of the association when the academic PGM concentration was initially established, they believed that they were instrumental in creating the student association that helped build the PGM concentration. They also believed that they had established meaningful traditions.

According to Darnell,

We didn't have a ton of upperclassmen when we got here in the program [concentration]. There was a few. ... For us, it was like that we were kind of starting something, sort of building from the ground up and I wanted to be a part of that. ...It gave us a chance to sort of develop some new activities and new traditions. ...I don't necessarily gravitate towards leadership roles, but it was something I wanted to do here. You could see there was a bigger picture and that we were all in it together.

Damon was also a student in the early years of the association and stated,

I feel like the students are responsible for, make, helping the program [concentration] grow and the things that we do as a student association, um, you know they reflect on the program to the outside community. ...I just want to see our program get bigger and better each year.

All of the students interviewed saw things that could be made better through their association involvement and believed that they had the power to make a difference. Kendall stated that leadership in the association "means that I am a part of something, that I kind of, I have a purpose when I go to school. I have a purpose other than just getting my work done, you know, I have a purpose to improve someone else's experience rather than my own." Although the student association has been in existence for a number of years, Todd identified areas that he thought that he could work to improve in the association,

As freshmen coming in this year, the word from the upperclassmen was not one of the best years for budgeting and there were some problems. You know it really showed me 'ok, we can make this better. Let's get our feet wet; let's see what we can do. I want to get involved.

Some of the students spoke of the desire to not only improve the lives of the current association membership, but to leave a legacy through their association involvement. Greg stated, "I want to help create a program that will forever be seen as a prestigious program throughout our, throughout the PGA Association and these PGA management universities. I want to create a program that will forever help the individuals that have gone through it."

Mikel also spoke of his desire to continue the work of previous leaders, "So we want to kind of just continue the legacy. That's what they kind of talk about, continuing it and making it better."

Some of the students viewed the association as a vehicle of empowerment to change not only their experiences and the experiences of their peers, but also to impact the community. James spoke of contributing to a great community cause through the association,

Par for the Cure was just a great experience and just to see the student association and different entities outside of us coming together and raising money for a great cause and then just seeing the level of participation all across the board was awesome, and being involved in something bigger than just our program was just great so... That was just a wonderful experience.

John spoke of his desire to impact the community through the association,

The association is unique because it has many people, and great ideas are given power by people. So I think the ability of young energetic individuals that have time and the muscles and the personality to really dive into a community...you see that it's not just a golf program. It's the ability to be a community impact, and um, that vision has not completely evolved yet.

Although many of the students suggested the association empowered the students, there was some indication some of the students, especially the freshmen, were not being empowered, resulting in a disengagement from the association during the previous year. According to Kendall,

I think that there have been a few instances where what has been said and what has been done, um, has really turned off a lot of the freshman as far as, nothing's gonna change so why should I say anything? They're [e-board] just going to keep doing what they're doing.

Shawn expressed a similar concern that some of the members of the e-board were somewhat non-receptive to the ideas of others. He stated,

Students need to realize that if we have a good idea for a tournament or we have a good idea for a fundraiser, then you don't have to be on the executive board to contribute those ideas. But right now we have the executive board built up like they are the reason the association exists, but it's kind of the other way around.

Shawn suggested also that students' initiatives are sometimes reversed or controlled by the faculty, leading to disengagement. He stated,

It's really hard for new members or perspective members to take ownership of the association when it doesn't feel like we're doing it for ourselves. There's constantly these things where they [faculty] are telling the students to take ownership, get involved, do this and feel good about it, and do it for yourself. Then, somewhere along the line during the process, usually toward the end of the process, it either gets modified or derailed in a way that makes the student wish they hadn't done it in the first place.

Theme 3: Competence

Although all of the students were of the opinion that association involvement enhanced their sense of relatedness to the other students and their academic program, the students who had been highly involved were most likely to articulate an increased sense of competence. Executive board involvement appears to be the primary path to an enhanced perception of competence through the association. The students reported increases in their perceptions of competence in the areas of general confidence, leadership, and professionalism.

A number of students spoke of attaining an overall enhanced sense of competence through their association membership. Pete spoke of his belief that he had been educated for life,

It's given me confidence in the fact that my ideas have been used and they've worked. My critical thinking skills, my common sense, have just been really, especially in this association, have really fostered and grown since I've been here. And that's the biggest thing, I think, for me going out of school right now is the confidence of am I, well, enough educated for life. That e-board gives you a sense of confidence that, hey, if you can do that, you can do this.

Todd also expressed an increased sense of global self-efficacy,

Coming here, I found that it's not easy, but I can handle this. So I'm not afraid to jump into difficult situations like being on e-board or maybe taking control of a special event that we're holding in those areas. I just feel like I can contribute more and I'm not afraid to.

Many of the students believed that through their association involvement, they were able to work more effectively with people, including conflict situations. They spoke of the increased leadership ability. Todd suggested that,

First and foremost [on e-board], you're learning how a, not really a business, you're just learning how a body of people, governing body works. I've learned the ins and outs of people putting in their opinion. You need to accept their opinion, look it over, and speak your mind, and have them speak their mind.

John spoke of the lessons learned through navigating through conflict with other students in the association,

We have damage control issues that we have to deal with between students or we have to police one another. Those issues right here that come up with a family atmosphere help you develop as a person. I don't want to downplay the interaction that students have and how much that impacts your ability to lead, your ability to understand what it means to be a part of a team. It's not about you; it's about the bigger picture.

Kendall suggested that involvement in the association had helped him learn to accept constructive criticism from his peers. He reported, "The e-board I think has changed me in the way that it made me understand how to work with people and how to not take things personally; constructive criticism is really hard for me to hear sometimes."

Mikel expressed what he had gotten out of the association this way, "I think that what I'll get out of it most is just that sense of leadership and that sense of I can make a change in the program." Kendall stated, "I think that being involved in the association has taught me how to work with people and allowed me to become more mature, to really understand what being a leader means." Greg, who had never served in a formal association leadership position, stated, "as a senior, it's important to step up ... just trying to lead by example, so the kids can see where they need to be in four years to be successful."

Some of the association leadership reported acquiring the important leadership skills of understanding one's personal limits and prioritization. According to John,

... those challenges provided by the e-board, they teach you certain lessons. It teaches you that you have limits. It teaches you when to say no. It teaches you that you want to be able to do everything you can, but you want to be able to do it well, and that's the toughest part is that you would love to be involved in everything, but you can't. I could only have learned that by being involved on the e-board.

Kendall stated, "I was the one out there setting up the fundraising events, and it really taught me, you know, a lot of responsibility. It also taught me that you can't do everything yourself. You need to be a leader and ask for help when you need it."

Many of the students, regardless of their level of association involvement, mentioned that they had learned to present themselves more professionally and confidently. According to James,

We have to dress up in a suit and tie (at the monthly meetings). And I think that's a lot more important than people might initially think, just to represent our program in that professional manner. It's not just coming out here and going to school and playing golf and meeting new people. It's the future business that we are trying to get into, and we need to stay focused on that.

Kendall, who stated that he was very shy in high school,

I've learned how to present myself, through being involved in the association, you know, meeting guest speakers and influential people. So I think being involved in this program has really allowed me to find my niche. I guess you could say that I am not really as shy as I was, because this is something I like. I've learned to be a little more outgoing and how to relate to people and just make conversation.

Theme 4: Fun

Many of the students spoke powerfully about the importance of the student association to their enjoyment of their academic program and college career. According to Kendall,

Our student association is what makes the program, being able to have a group of students, um, creating memories and experiences. It just makes it that much more fun. It just makes the experience that much more memorable and personal. I think that's priceless.

John stated,

I think any journey worth going on should be tough, but it should be filled with a lot of memories and it should be filled with, you know, a lot of friendships. I think that's what the student association provides, the enjoyment of it all.

Finally, according to Pete,

You're not going to remember a class in 30 years, I don't know the History of Rock and Roll, but you will be remembering the times with the guys. And that's what builds overall happiness and contentment, that you lived it.

Discussion

Interpreting research findings from a theoretical perspective is important. One of the most valuable aspects of using qualitative methods is the validation of theory. A theory that explains the results of this study is self-determination theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Ryan & Deci, 2002). According to SDT, individuals are motivated to participate in those experiences that satisfy their basic psychological needs for relatedness, self-determination, and competence (Deci & Ryan). They are intrinsically motivated to engage in internally enjoyable and satisfying experiences. Engagement in activities that satisfy these basic needs, in turn, contributes to the individual's growth and well-being (Deci & Ryan). The results of this study suggest that PGMSA membership satisfied the students' basic psychological needs, especially those students who were highly involved in the association's leadership.

Relatedness

The students overwhelmingly suggested that the PGMSA satisfied their need for relatedness. Their early involvement with the association helped them to feel welcome and to establish friendships. The relationships with other association members expanded and deepened their connections with the association. Their association relationships offered support, a sense of identity, and helped them navigate the demands of the concentration. Some students went so far as to say the association provided a sense of family. The association not only connected the students with each other, it expanded their feelings of connection to the profession and faculty.

According to SDT, individuals will be intrinsically motivated to participate in activities that provide a sense of relatedness, as relatedness satisfies a basic human need. There is evidence indicating that the benefits of the relatedness provided through extracurricular activities, such as student clubs and associations, may have important developmental and academic outcomes that extend beyond the association itself.

Involvement in extracurricular activities, such as student associations that are associated with an academic institution or program, can provide students with an additional sense of attachment or bonding to the academic institution itself, commitment to its values, positive attitudes toward school, and greater student retention (Darling, Caldwell, & Smith, 2005; Eccles & Barber, 1999; Marsh & Kleitman, 2002). Extracurricular school-based activities with their attendant relationships and activities can also provide students with a valued identity, one that reinforces the importance and salience of their academic preparation (Eccles & Barber, 1999). Through their involvement, students see themselves as a valued member of the university community (Eccles & Barber, 1999). Research suggests the forging of these meaningful relationships with peers and faculty early in an academic career, as was evidenced in this study, leads to the integration of the students into the college community and identification with the school (Baker, 2008; Marsh & Kleitman, 2002). These relationships can provide both the supports necessary to be successful academically, as well as a sense of belonging in the institution (Darling, 2005).

Self-determination/Autonomy

SDT proposes that individuals are also intrinsically motivated to participate in activities that provide them with a sense of personal control and agency (Deci & Ryan, 2008). The PGMSA students, especially the students who were on the e-board, stated that their involvement with the association gave them a sense of self-determination and empowerment. They felt a great sense of ownership and pride in the success of the association, and through that, the academic concentration. The upperclassmen believed that their efforts had contributed to the early success and prestige attained by the PGA concentration, and that they had been instrumental in setting that direction and steering the activities of the association. The newer students believed that they could make a contribution to the association's improvement and contribute to its legacy, thereby improving the national reputation of the academic concentration. Some of the students also believed that, through the association, they could impact the welfare of the broader community.

Research suggests the sense of personal agency and self-determination that is attained through association involvement may have broader developmental and academic ramifications. A sense of autonomy and personal power is a basic human need and an important developmental asset (Curtis, 2008; Deci & Ryan, 2008). Young people need developmental opportunities that provide them with the belief that they can influence the trajectory of their own lives (Benson, 2006). They flourish when they are given meaningful societal roles and a voice in shaping the activities in which they are engaged (Witt & Caldwell, 2005). Oftentimes college students do not experience autonomy and empowerment in academic environments (Vieira, 2002). Students do experience empowerment when the curricular and extracurricular activities in which they are involved are perceived as meaningful, relevant, impacting, and self-determined (Vieira, 2002; Weber & Patterson, 2000).

Involvement in extracurricular school activities has the potential to increase students' perceptions of personal control over their lives outside of the academic environment (Broh, 2002). Involvement in student organizations, especially those that promote community engagement, can provide students with a sense of personal empowerment and self-efficacy (Baker, 2008) and positively impact attitudes toward community engagement (Eklund-Leen & Young, 1997). Research suggests when students are given substantial voice and ownership in service activities, future civic engagement is enhanced (Morgan & Streb, 2001). Moreover, Eklund-Leen and Young (1997) found a strong relationship between leadership within student organizations and broader campus involvement. Extracurricular activities can reinforce the strong and consistent civic values that are important in university settings (Nadler, 1997).

Competence

SDT proposes that individuals are also intrinsically motivated to participate in activities that provide them with a sense of competence (Deci & Ryan, 2008). The students in this study, especially those who were on the e-board, reported that their involvement with the association had contributed to their perception of competence and critical thinking skills. Some reported an increase in a general sense of competence. Others articulated improvement in their ability to work with others effectively as lead-

ers and to present themselves confidently. Some students stated they had learned how to prioritize and delegate tasks through their leadership role in the student association.

The elevated perception of competence and leadership skills acquired through student associations can extend beyond the association itself. Abrahamowicz (1988) stated, "student organizations and related activities provide educational and developmental benefits generally unattainable in the classroom" (p. 235). Student organizations provide a laboratory for leadership development in which students learn, are tested, succeed, and sometimes fail (Guido-DiBrito & Batchelor, 1988). Since opportunities for students to practice leadership in the classroom are limited, the involvement in student organizations provides the necessary practice ground for development (Wankat & Oreovicz, 2002) and the attainment of teamwork, leadership, and decision-making skills necessary for the workplace (Munter, 2002). Faculty members cite networking and the opportunity to gain practical experiences as the two primary benefits of having clubs (Kane & Jisha, 2004).

Students who are actively engaged in leadership positions within student associations can develop skills of self-confidence, planning, decision making, leadership, interpersonal, teamwork, listening, written and oral communications (Rainey, 1995), and time management (Wankat & Oreovicz, 2002). Engagement in structured, challenging extracurricular school activities, such as leadership positions in student associations, have a greater effect on positive developmental and academic outcomes than involvement in less challenging activities (Marsh & Kleitman, 2002).

Enjoyment

SDT suggests that individuals are intrinsically motivated to participate in activities that are stimulating, fun, enjoyable (Gillet, Vallerand, & Rosnet, 2009; Pelletier et al., 1995) and "spontaneously satisfying" (Deci & Ryan, 2008, pp. 15). The PGMSA students suggested that it was the association experiences which were among the most enjoyable and memorable of their college careers. For many of the students, the association provided the relationships and contexts (e.g., socials, tournaments, meetings, and volunteering) that allowed them to create their most meaningful college memories.

While the enjoyable activities experienced through student associations are important in their own right, they may extend beyond just the enjoyment of the association to the enjoyment of the school experience, more broadly. Research has found that students who were involved in extracurricular activities reported enjoying school more (Eccles & Barber, 1999) and had more positive attitudes towards school than students that were uninvolved in extracurricular activities (Darling, Caldwell, & Smith, 2005). Enjoyment and satisfaction with school lead to greater student effort and retention (Deci & Ryan, 2008).

All association members did not benefit equally from their involvement. While the students unanimously stated the association had contributed to their sense of connection to their peers and the program, it was primarily those involved in leadership positions that accrued the benefits of empowerment and competence from their association involvement. Students who believed they had a role in the advancement of the association, tested themselves and acquired important leadership skills in the process. It is logical that the level of one's commitment and involvement with a student

organization would affect the outcomes obtained from participation (Darling, Caldwell, & Smith, 2005) with the more involved students gleaning the most benefit. However, previous research also suggests extremely high involvement in extracurricular activities can undermine academic outcomes by shifting students' identification and investment away from their academics (Marsh & Kleitman, 2002; Yin & Lei, 2007).

Additionally, although many of the students suggested their basic needs for relatedness, self-determination, and competence were met through the association, there is some evidence that when they are not met, the PGMSA association is weakened. In this study, the PGMSA students discussed the negative impact of students not having a voice, being on the outside looking in, and being closed to other non-PGMSA relationships. The students who participated in this study were at least minimally involved in the association (e.g., regularly attended monthly meetings). Their experiences cannot be generalized to PGM students who are disengaged members of their student association.

Implications for Academic Programs

This study has a number of implications for the design and implementation of student associations. Student associations can play an important role in creating a sense of identity and community among students. Through involvement, students can share enjoyable and meaningful experiences that create bonds, as well as common goals and values. An essential ingredient is that the students feel welcomed and supported by the association. Optimally, students are given voice in the selection of meaningful goals and the ways in which they will accomplish those goals. The academic institution may set parameters on their activities and faculty guidance is critical, however, students must believe that what they are doing is important and that they have the power to make a difference. They clearly must have a sense of ownership.

The association activities in which the students engage must provide an optimal challenge. The students will not acquire a sense of competence unless they are stretched and have the opportunity to grow; however, the students must also have the requisite skills necessary to, with effort, be successful. Faculty must help students acquire the internal and external resources to navigate challenges in a wide variety of domains, e.g., conducting events, managing budgets, planning meetings, mentoring peers, and guiding organizations. A student association cannot extend the academic program optimally unless involvement results in new knowledge and skills. The acquisition of the skills necessary to be an effective and inclusive leader may be particularly challenging for the students. While the students must experience a sense of self-determination in conducting the activities of the association, guidance in the development of appropriate leadership and conflict management skills is necessary.

Finally, the student association must be an enjoyable experience. As Pete stated, when the student association becomes too formal and structured, "it becomes more of a chore; it becomes more of a 'do we have to do this?' sort of attitude. I mean we're still kids." Ideally, student associations should be fun and a context for the creation of enjoyable college memories.

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