

# Student Life Research

Division of Student Affairs ~ Texas Tech University ~ Fall 2004

## Keys to Retain Students: Student Involvement and Personal Interaction

The opportunity to participate in co-curricular and extracurricular activities at college is often misrepresented in popular "college crazy" movies such as *Animal House* and *Old School*. Not all co-curricular college activities that engage students' time and attention are related to pranks and bingeing. Students can, and often do participate in activities that benefit their well-being and college commitment in a more substantive way through membership in student organizations.

### Student Organization Activity

Colleges and universities support a myriad of organized groups for students' participation. There are academic/professional career-oriented, service, sport, social, religious, activist and special interest associations available for students to join. Positive opportunities for student involvement and development can occur through their membership within an organization.

Studies have shown that extra-curricular activity, and specifically student organizations have the potential to reduce dropout rates and encourage retention (Tinto, 1987; Astin, 1975; Christie & Dinham, 1990; Noel, Levitz, Saluri, and Associates, 1991). Such activities encourage social interaction and involve students in their campus community resulting in more positive relationships while in college. In addition, students learn from their experience of being involved in a student organization. Community service activity, budgeting, fundraising, officer responsibility, teamwork, increased socialization, planning, decision making and problem solving carry far reaching significance for student development beyond their college experience. These are the skills that students carry with them into the workplace, PTA, civic, and community life.



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**The goal of the Student Life Research area is to provide information about the contemporary American college student with an emphasis on the Texas Tech student body. Research studies conducted provided data used to assist faculty and staff in understanding students, reporting/accreditation activity, graduate and undergraduate research projects, and to support on-going campus programs and services.**

Are co-curricular experiences more significant than classroom experiences for students? Some would argue that there are unique advantages for students who participate in organizations (Abrahamowicz, 1988). Still, others view student organization activity as providing benefits that employment outside the classroom would not match (Williams and Winston 1985). The fact of the matter is that faculty and staff advisors are recognized as providing the largest positive influence (Light & Schroeder, 1989) on student development. Instructional interaction guiding student decision making and leadership training were some of the notable outcomes gained from organization involvement.

### Advisor Influence

Advisors provide members with the most consistent source of guidance and information related to the student organization experience, particularly those with an academic/professional mission. It is the faculty/staff interaction with students outside of the classroom settings that has been cited as one of the most important benefits to student retention. Whatever the activity, learning presented in a co-curricular setting is difficult to replicate in the classroom (Morrell & Morrell, 1986). Very few collegiate experiences provide a better opportunity to get to know students personally while mentoring them in communication, leadership, and professional skills.

Many colleges have made a commitment to continuous training for out-of-classroom learning experiences. University of Northern Colorado (UNC) incorporates such activities that support continuous student development through student government, Greek umbrella groups, publications staff and student programming boards. Other schools use transcripts of student activity that guide students through various developmental skill inventories. University of Nebraska and the National Association for Campus Activities (NACA) have studied this process and collected numerous examples of documenting student activity and growth through co-curricular involvement programs and student organization membership (Morrell & Morrell, 1986).

### Research at Texas Tech

The Division of Student Affairs (DSA) at Texas Tech University (TTU) provides support and funding for student organizations, along with leadership training for both advisors and students. TTU has over 375 recognized student organizations and each of these has a faculty or staff member advising them. Although the organization constitution, by-laws, and temperament dictate individual advisors level of involvement, rest assured that student development is occurring within these groups.

Two research studies were conducted in 2003 by the DSA Office of Assessment & Student Life Research;

one was for TTU seniors (n=165), the College Student Survey (CSS), and the other for incoming freshman (n=1201), the Cooperative Institute Research Program (CIRP). In the area of involvement, the research indicated that level of student involvement fluctuated somewhat between freshman and senior years (Table 1). Nonetheless the study revealed that during their tenure at the university senior students had opportunity for involvement and important developmental interaction with faculty and staff advisors.

In addition, the CSS revealed that the TTU senior student level of interaction with faculty during their academic programs was measurably higher than other CSS student participants in 8 of 10 categories (Table 2). Only opportunities to work on research, and intellectual challenge and stimulation at college were rated slightly lower for TTU than at the other participating public universities in the study.

### Impact on the Institution

Collective research studies on the impact of student activity and involvement on campus and in student organizations have been strong contributors in college retention. Astin (1984) recognized the contribution of co-curricular activity and involvement with greater than average retention in his longitudinal studies conducted on students at the UCLA Higher Education Research Institute. Activities give more meaning to student's lives (Williams and Winston, 1985); they increase student satisfaction, thus leading to higher student retention rates (Ross-Powers, 1980).

The benefits of co-curricular activity like those supported by the Student Affairs offices contribute to student retention and overall success. More importantly, it is the direct interaction with faculty and staff during both co-curricular and academic programs that positively affects student development and aids retention during the collegiate experience.

*Table 1. Level of Involvement  
Student clubs/groups*

Participation hours	Seniors/2005 Class	Freshman/2009 Class
None	34	20
Less than 1 hour	15	14
1 to 2 hours	21	27
3 to 5 hours	21	19

*Table 2. Faculty Interaction with Students*

*Professors at your college frequently provided you with:*

<i>By percentile</i>	<i>TTU</i>	<i>Other Public Univs.</i>
Encouraged grad/professional study	29	18
Opportunity to work on research	12	14
Advise on education program	33	16
Respect (treated as a peer)	64	36
Support and encouragement	24	10
Letter of recommendation	18	13
Assistance with study skills	12	5
Intellectual challenge / stimulation	33	37
Discussion outside of class	43	30
<u>Help achieving professional goals</u>	<u>34</u>	<u>15</u>

Senior student report from one college at Texas Tech (n=165)

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