African American Male Involvement on Campus

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Abstract

If involvement in campus life is a contributing factor to students' development in college and post-college success, it is imperative to understand how African American males are involved and to identify the reasons the majority of them do not participate in campus activities. This paper examines the hypothesis of increasing involvement in campus organizations among academically average performing African American males as new retention strategy for pre-dominantly White Institutions (PWIs). After examining existing literature and conducting empirical research, it is affirmed that student involvement, in addition to other campus resources, has the ability to produce positive relationships and institutional commitment that decrease the likelihood of student withdrawal.

Introduction

"The Amazing Vanishing Black male is playing at a college campus near you," "Young Black, and Male in America: An endangered species," "Where are all the Black men in college?" are headlines of news articles and other forms of literature that allude to the low participation of Black males in higher education (Alexander, 2004; Gibbs, 1998, Jaschik, 2006). These titles are indicative of the nation's crisis regarding the higher education of African American males. While it is important to address strategies to encourage more attendance among African American males, it is even more important to consider the experience and perceptions of those that have already entered higher education institutions. African American male participation in higher education accounts for less than 5 percent of total undergraduate enrollment and of that 5 percent, only a third will earn a degree in six years (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). Graduating more African American males will improve the number of young men that enroll in college; because the completion of undergraduate studies among this population will become more of a reality.

There are multiple opinions on effective strategies to increase retention and graduation of African American males ranging from reallocation of financial aid to increased academic support. This paper will narrow the conversation and focus on increasing the participation of African American male involvement in student leadership opportunities and campus organizations as a retention strategy. The theme of supportive relationships with same-race peers, faculty and administrations have resurfaced in literature regarding the undergraduate experience of African Americans since the early work of Astin (1982). Since that time more contemporary research has been done on the role of student leadership to achieve educational success. New literature reinforces the need for positive peer relationships, but also suggests that the way

students utilize out-of-class time determine whether they will persist or depart from higher

education institutions, especially for African American males (Harper, 2006).

In the article *What Knowledge Users Want,* Robert E. Floden (2006) addresses the

usefulness of educational inquiry to explain current phenomena and practitioners' needs for

research to explain practical problems. Therefore, this educational inquiry will provide

perspective of the causes of disengagement among African American males, the most

academically disadvantaged demographic group.

In order to more fully understand the social conditions that characterize the African

American male experience in education and society, background data about this group is

provided in the proceeding section. The statistical information presented frames the foundation

of this educational inquiry, which considers the ways in which higher education institutions can

better serve African American males.

<div style="text-align:center">Background Data</div>

The ages between 16 and 24 are critical times for any group of men, as they make

fundamental life changes regarding their work, schooling, vocational training and family

formation (Han, Mincy, and Lewis, 2006). Yet, these are some of the most difficult times for

Black men. In 2005, 7.5 percent of black men ages 18-29 were college graduates or held

advanced degrees, 19.5 percent ages 16-29 were unemployed, and 10.1 percent ages 18-29 were

in prison. In 2003, 84.6 percent of deaths of African American men between the ages of 15-24

were the result of homicide (Henry J.Kaiser Family Foundation, 2006). According to the

statistics, young black men receive less formal education, experience unemployment, and die

from homicides more times than their same sex peers in different racial groups. These statistics

illustrate the on-going issues pertaining to the quality of life for young black males. Ronald B,

Mincy , professor of Social Work at Columbia University, argues that the issues related to black men can no longer be ignored (Han, Mincy, and Lewis, 2006). Regarding education, the overwhelming large majority of black males cannot attest to the benefits associated with higher education.

Therefore, it is critical for higher education institutions to make the graduation of African American males a priority once they enroll in college. The graduation of more African American males can positively enhance the quality of life for these men, their families and communities. On the other hand, the failure to do so can further perpetuate staggering statistics that characterize the African American male experience in America.

<p align="center">Theoretical/Conceptual Framework</p>

Higher education theorists claim that student involvement and forming key relationships are critical to students' academic success and their worldview development. According to Astin (1982), student involvement is defined as "the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience" (p. 297). In earlier work, he claimed that a student's satisfaction with the collegiate environment determines their level of involvement (Astin, 1977). Therefore, college contentment and/or dissatisfaction influences how students choose to spend their time out of the classroom. Perceptions of the institution determine if students will pursue non-cognitive activities that may enhance their educational experience vs. non-school related activities. Pascarella and Terenzini further described the theory of student involvement by stating, "The greater the effort and personal investment a student makes [through involvement], the greater the likelihood of educational and personal returns on that investment across the spectrum of college student outcomes" (1991, p. 648).

Student involvement leads to the formation of key relationships with peers, faculty and administrators. Relationships with faculty and support services are considered critical to student satisfaction and development (Astin, 1993). It is conceivable, that these needs are heightened among undergraduate African American males, as they may feel separation at PWIs (Love, 1993; Allen, 1992).

In an effort to evaluate participation in campus organizations as a retention strategy, I also consider Tinto's (1987) model of student institutional departure. According to the model, a student's decision to withdraw from a higher education institution is the result of cumulative interactions between the individual and institution and is influenced by pre-entry attributes, student's educational and career goals, students' commitment to their goals, and integration into the environment. There is substantial overlap between Tinto's model of departure and Astin's theory of involvement. Students became integrated in the environment when they are involved in institutional organizations and activities. Without sufficient commitment to the institution, the possibility of withdrawal is reasonable. Large universities have the unique challenge of creating systems of inclusion, in which all students have a vested interest despite high student populations.

<div align="center">Methods</div>

Students at a mid-western liberal arts university participated in a mixed-method data collection process to measure their perceptions of student leadership positions and campus organizations. Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) describe the value of mixed method research as having the ability to maximize the field of educational research by improving the strengths and deemphasizing the weaknesses of quantitative and qualitative approaches. The qualitative section of the research consisted of three two-hour focus group sessions regarding students' on-campus

experiences. The second focus group session was designed to initiate dialogue on the reasons for

attrition among African American males.

The qualitative aspect of the design method asked students to respond to questions

pertaining to why males do not get involved in campus organizations. Although the forums were

available to all students, the majority of those attended were members of an inter-racial

fraternity. Focus group participants were from different racial and ethnic backgrounds,

approximately 61.9% were African American, 3.4% were Hispanic, and the remainder self-

identified as Caucasian/White. Students represented various levels of educational classifications,

17.1% were Freshman, 37.9% were Sophomores, 31% were Juniors and 13.7% were Seniors.

They also reflected varying levels of GPA's, 11 with GPA's between 2 and 2.49, 10 with GPAs

between 2.5 and 2.00, 6 with GPAs between 3 and 3.49 and 2 with GPAs above 3.49. Selection

for participation in the focus groups session was an easy process, because the fraternity's

leadership mandated attendance. The sessions were transcribed, but not distributed to attendees.

Guided discussions about the relationship among retention and use of campus resources

allowed researches to make connections between the reasons students exit the university and to

what extent can the institution allocate resources to enhance matriculation. The constant

comparison method (Smith, 2007) was used to identity themes in the focus group and compared

them with the quantitative data. In terms of quantitative data, 29 undergraduates were asked to

complete surveys rating the level of preparedness in pre-college educational experience in the

areas of 1) college level writing 2) college math and 3) college level research. They were asked

to rate their view of campus climate and individual comfort level and to what degree does the

campus climate affect performance. Lastly, researchers inquired about their perspective

regarding racial tensions at the university. By identifying student's levels of prior preparation,

researchers have a better understanding as to what are the factors in pre-college experiences that may impact a student's decision to exit the university.

Analysis

Most of the survey participants agreed that they were overall academically prepared for college, except in the area of college research. However when isolating the data in terms of race, African American males responded differently regarding preparation, 37.5% felt they were not prepared for college level research, 44% for college math and 25% for writing. The majority of the participants disagreed that on-campus race relations were tense. The data proves on average, African American males are academically underprepared for college work in some areas. Through self-reported responses, students acknowledge they entered the learning environment with deficient academic skills. The cumulative effect of feeling of academic inadequate, may lead to attrition. On the other hand, the majority of African American male respondents that reported low academic preparedness affirm to using on-campus academic resources. Without these resources students may continue to fall behind and perceive the institution as negative, because of an inability to be successful in the environment.

Family obligations, unmet financial needs, and lack of focus were the dominant reasons for institutional exit. Family obligations remain an obscure term with various interpretations, for some this refers to their duties as a father and others their supportive role in their immediate family unit. Despite the individual definition, family obligations, were considered barriers among the African American participants. The following remarks represent participant responses:

Trying to be here is hard when I have to return home to take care of stuff for my family. When they need something, I have to get it.

I have to work to take care of my son. I want that paper (diploma) so I can go to my

employer and say give me the paper (money),(personal communication, April 17, 2009).

Students both Black and White admitted that the ability to compensate for lack of funds was difficult and have lead the peers to withdraw from school. Lastly, the lack of clear vision and focus influenced some of their peers to withdraw.

The majority of survey respondents reported that participation in campus organizations is important. Approximately, half of them hold leadership positions and participation in athletic teams/clubs represented the greatest level of involvement in organizations. This statistic was valid for African American participants as well, 44% reported to hold a leadership position in a campus organization. During the focus group, students identified lack of knowledge about the benefits of participating in campus organizations as the primary cause of low African American male participation. The data suggests that while, most participants including African American perceive participation as positive, relatively few are involved in co-curricular, multi-cultural, or professional organizations.

<div align="center">Discussion</div>

The initial premise was to verify that participation in student leadership opportunities and campus organizations was an effective retention strategy for African American male undergraduates. The research results suggest that family obligations, unmet financial needs, and lack of focus were the most common themes for African American withdrawal. Yet, when asked about service needed to overcome these challenges, the majority of participants agreed they just needed support, authentic positive relationships in which they could vent about their problems and receive guidance. Most decided that they desired these types of relationships with peers, faculty and administrators. On the onset, there may not seem to be a logical connection between

student retention and campus organization participation. However, participation in campus organizations can provide African American male students with the types of relationships they aspire to form.

Prominent scholars in the field have approached understanding the collegiate experience of African American males in two distinct forms, through a qualitative analysis focused on the role of peer support groups in assisting high-performing African American males (Harper, 2006) and the quantitative analysis of the correlation between positive relationships and academic performance (Strayhorn, 2008). Harper's work presents a better understanding of the factors contributing to the success of African American male undergraduate students.

Dr. Shaun Harper's analysis of high-achieving African American males reveals the importance of establishing peer groups early on in a student's academic career. The study involved 32 well-rounded African American male students representing six mid-western large public research institutions. Actively participating in minority affiliated-campus organizations were strategies the participants employed to expand their professional network, gain new friends, and enhance employability skills. As a result of their membership, participants gained respect and encouragement to pursue leadership within those organizations and other campus groups. The learning point of his study was the importance for African American males to be linked to their peers in order to establish a sense of belonging when they are the minority in institutions of higher learning. Group identity is a key aspect of African American culture. Understanding this theoretical and cultural perspective is a guide to create and sustain programming aimed at increasing the graduation rate of African American males.

Harper's work (2006) set the stage for my further inquiry about academically average (GPA of 2.0 and higher) performing African American male students that are also considered to

be disengaged in the campus environment. The general consensus among participants in

Harper's study report that the majority of their African American peers struggled academically,

played long hours of video games and pursued romantic relationships with females (Harper,

2006 p. 348). This narrow description does not characterize all of the participants in my research

study; however, strong behavioral commonalities exist. Consequently, the current study was

designed to explore the perceptions of students that are considered disengaged.

In order to ensure the success of the majority of Black male students, more research and

programmatic attention has to be focused on the students that are disengaged in order to

understand their priorities and allocate appropriate resources. Students that are not directly

linked to campus organizations may not experience the same level of belonging compared to

their high achieving peers. This research achieved the objective of understanding the needs of

target population. Throughout all three sessions, the longing for positive relationships emerged

as a priority.

The success of the participants in Harper's study (2006) suggests increasing the

involvement of African American males in leadership roles and campus organizations may be a

viable strategy to retain more students that otherwise may drop out. Although Strayhorn's (2008)

work does not provide any insight into the perceptions of student leadership and campus

organizations among undergraduate African American male students, it does present new

perspectives on the correlation between supportive relationships and academic success. This

study is the first attempt to quantify the impact of relationships among African American male

students. Unlike Harper's qualitative research, Strayhorn analyzed a sample of African

American men that completed the College Student Questionnaire, which measures student

satisfaction.

The data analysis confirmed that despite differences in age, marital status and parent's educational status, positive relationships with peers, faculty and staff caused the student to be more satisfied with their educational experience. Even in institutions with negative campus climates, positive relationships can enhance the experience. However, the study did not find a correlation between increased grade point averages and/or academic performance with establishing relationships. Therefore, positive relationships alone are not enough to retain and graduate African American male students.

While neither increased participation and positive relationships independently, prove to be effective strategies, these coupled with other institutional resources may circumvent the attrition of undergraduate African American male students. The current study confirms that positive relationship achieved through participation in campus organizations is an effective strategy to retain Black males. One survey participants describes a period in which he withdrew from school:

> Man, these folks that work here do not care anything about you once you can't play sports for them. When I had my injury and couldn't play anymore and had to drop-out. I didn't hear from them coaches. The same coach that came to my house and talked with my mama about recruiting me acted like he didn't even know me after I left the team. The only people that called me to check on me were my brothers [fraternity members]. My brothers told me I needed to come back to school. I am back in school not because of the people that work here, but my brothers (personal communication April 11, 2009).

This student's story illustrates the importance for African American men to develop relationships that are caring, but in which they can be held accountable. Participating in campus organizations is a mechanism to form those bonds.

Yet, there is a need for educating this population about the potential role non-fraternal and race-affiliated campus organization can have on one's development. The Black Student Union was the most highly recognized campus organization among African American focus group members. Participating in professional and career-specific organizations is critical to enhancing the required skill set of one's chosen field. Only one African American student was affiliated with a student professional organization; he majors in insurance and risk management and will hold a committee position next fall. As a result of assessing the qualitative data, it seems that the target population has a limited realm of knowledge that prohibits them from making connections between campus involvement and achieving future career goals. Various survey participants made the following remarks pertaining to campus organizations and civic engagement:

> Black men don't know anything about that. We weren't raised like that. We need to know what's in it for me. What will I gain? I need to know the benefits (personal communication, April 11, 2009).

These responses are reflective of Tinto's model of institutional departure and his reference to pre-entry attributes. The participants' opinions that the average African American male is not socialized to consider leadership positions in high school or other pre-college experiences challenges student affairs professionals to consider prior knowledge when reaching out to students. Students' predisposition regarding campus organizations and minority status on predominantly White campuses helps educational researchers explain the causes for low student

involvement among African American males. The reason for high participation in athletics is also made evident. African American males are socialized to value athletics and continuing participation in college is an extension of previous experience.

A student in Harper's (2005) interviews, admitted that he was became a leader on campus as a result of his high school extracurricular record. He knew the value and perks of being involved and continued on the path. Other student interviewees sought participation in campus organizations after being mentored by older African American undergraduate students. "The high achievers initially chose to join particular campus organizations because older African American male student leaders reached out to them when they were first-year students" (Harper, 2005, p.10). Again, the notion of positive productive relationships enhances social capital for African American males. Without the guidance of older students some of the high achievers that were surveyed may have had other experiences.

I posit that academically average performing students are not involved in campus organizations, because they are not informed about the benefits of active membership, which include improved speaking ability, the ability to work with diverse people, and enhanced employment prospects. For increased participation and involvement to occur among this group, further education must be available about the linkage between students group and professional and organizations. Because of an exclusionary history, minority groups do not easily recognize paths to gaining access to leadership positions. Moreover, students must also begin to understand how decisions are made on their respective campuses, which will only occur through increased involvement. In order for students' perspective to be heard on issues, they must have access to the conversation, increased involvement is the gateway.

Universities are microcosms of society, in which decisions are made in similar processes in

the business, education, legal and public policy environment. Students that are exposed to leadership and group dynamics early on have a greater advantage to gain access to leadership positions during post-college years. In this new politically innovative arena shaped by the election of President Barack Obama, hopefuls suggest that this election will spark a new wave of youth and young adult engagement, especially among African American males. While African American males do have an example of new leadership and possible paths of opportunity, they have to recognize how President Obama positioned himself for the presidency. He began by participating in campus organizations and student leadership opportunities. Admittedly, not all African American male want to become public officials, but all of them do want the best life possible. Furthermore, involvement in out-of-class experiences provides new opportunities. The days of just attending class are over, in order to competitive students must be able to demonstrate balanced and diverse experiences. Higher education administrators and student affairs professionals have to consistently drive this message home to disengaged African American males. Involvement produces the positive relationships African American male students seek and deeper commitment to the institution, which has the ability to keep them for withdrawing.

While participants in the current study report that race relations on their campus are positive, a negative campus climate can serve as a barrier for increasing African American male involvement at some PWIs (Smith, 2007). Dr. Charles Brown (2006) of the University of South Florida, St. Petersburg interviewed twenty-five African American male undergraduate students at a southern PWI regarding their out-of-classroom experiences. Racial stereotyping and negative perceptions of the Black men were believed to be the primary reason for the lack of involvement in campus organizations. These survey participants did not feel welcome at the institution, only tolerated, and thereby found support in same-race peer groups. Respondents were asked to agree

on a list of five organizations that positively contributes to their campus experience, the following were mentioned: the Student Government Association (SGA), intramural athletics and recreation, the student union, mentoring and peer relationships (Brown, 2006, p.55).

Although the students listed these organizations and facilities as meaningful, they did not hold any leadership positions associated with any of the organizations and services. For instance, one student in Brown's survey did not trust the SGA leadership, but recognized the organizations ability to make decisions that impact all students and therefore sought membership, but does not consider a leadership position because it would be hard for an African American man to get elected (Brown, 2006, p.54). Other participants in the same research focus group report to frequently hang out in the Union, but were never asked to join the Union's student leadership board nor were they aware of the process to do so (Brown, 2006, 53).

Brown's results are significant, because they allude to the impact of a negative campus climate on student engagement. Therefore, higher education leaders must do more outreach to minority groups, specifically African American men. One strategy to increase involvement among this particular group is to provide consistent channels of communication to allow students the opportunity to provide feedback of their on-campus experiences to student affairs leadership. Semester assessments measuring students' perception of campus climate will 1) increase ownership and commitment to the university and 2) make available the necessary information to students affairs leadership on how to effectively engage all students. Often times, students are clear about the services they need and desire to have from their institutions. The challenge to higher education leaders is empower students by creating systems in which students' voices and opinions are heard. Furthermore, students need to be able to know how their opinions influence change on their respective campus.

Limitations

The study was insufficiently focused. We were not only trying to identify the reasons African American males fail to persist, but also indentify the strategies to solve retention related issues, and thirdly evaluate the resources used by African American men on campus. In order to have a comprehensive understanding of student participation, there would need to be a more rigorous study that isolated other variables and focused on perceptions and linking the actual participation to pre and post-college activities. Also, the survey process failed to achieve rigor, because of flaws in the design of the instrument.

For instance, the survey asked students about their involvement in co-curricular organizations; however, these types of organizations were not defined. Therefore, students may have had membership in co-curricular organizations, but did not refer to them as such. Students were asked to identify the number of organizations they participated in, but not to ask to list them. With more information about their current out-of-class activities, the researchers would have had better insight into student's values and perceptions. Nor were students asked to identify the organizations that they frequently benefited from; it is equally important to understand how students are supported by the work of students groups, in which they do not have direct membership.
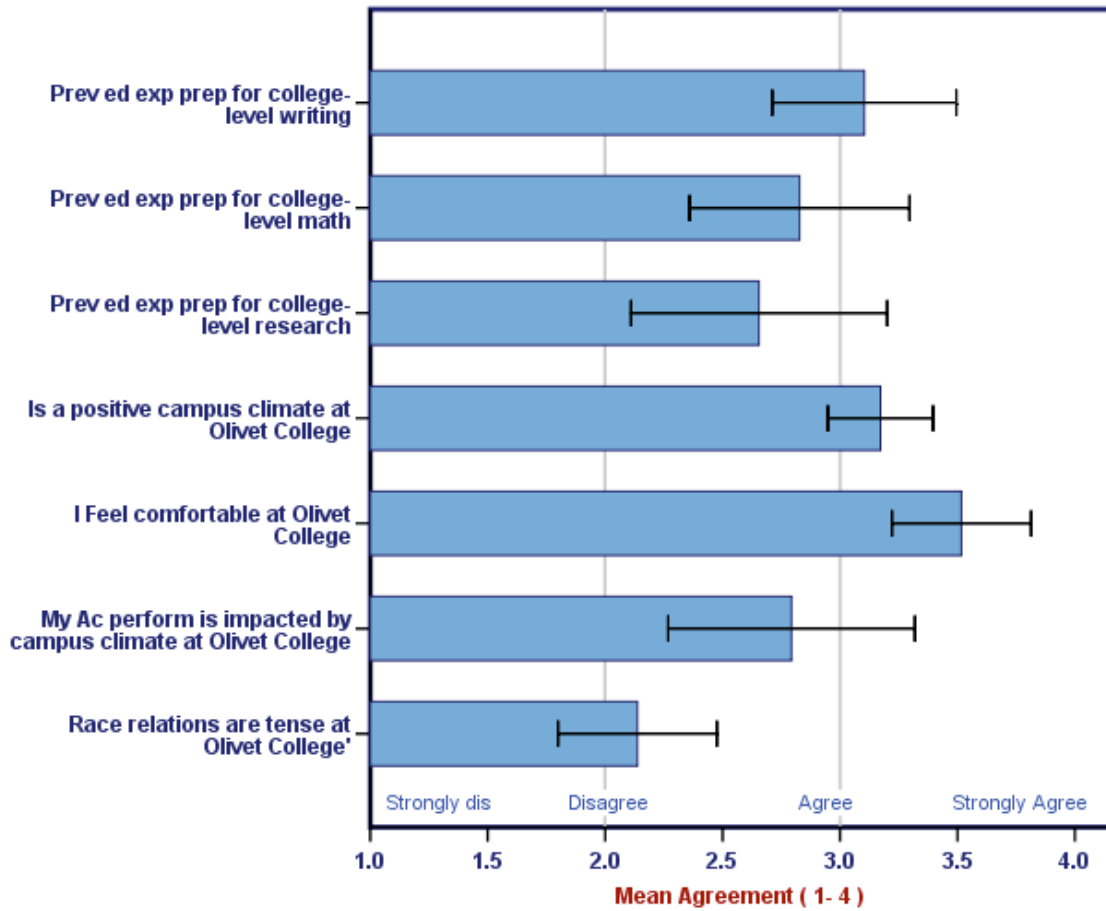
Directly contrasting my work to that of another researcher limited my scope and prevented fulfilling my educational inquiry of understanding student leadership perception among average academically performing students and if student participation was an effective retention strategy. Through conceptualization and epistemological development, I fulfilled the latter portion of the inquiry, but a more rigorous approach would have produced richer results. Once new variables and unknown questions were established after synthesizing the literature, the

research process should have reflected designing a survey instruments that would have provided information to fill the knowledge gap. In retrospect, there is still much to uncover about the depth of perceptions of student leadership and campus involvement among non-high achieving African American males.
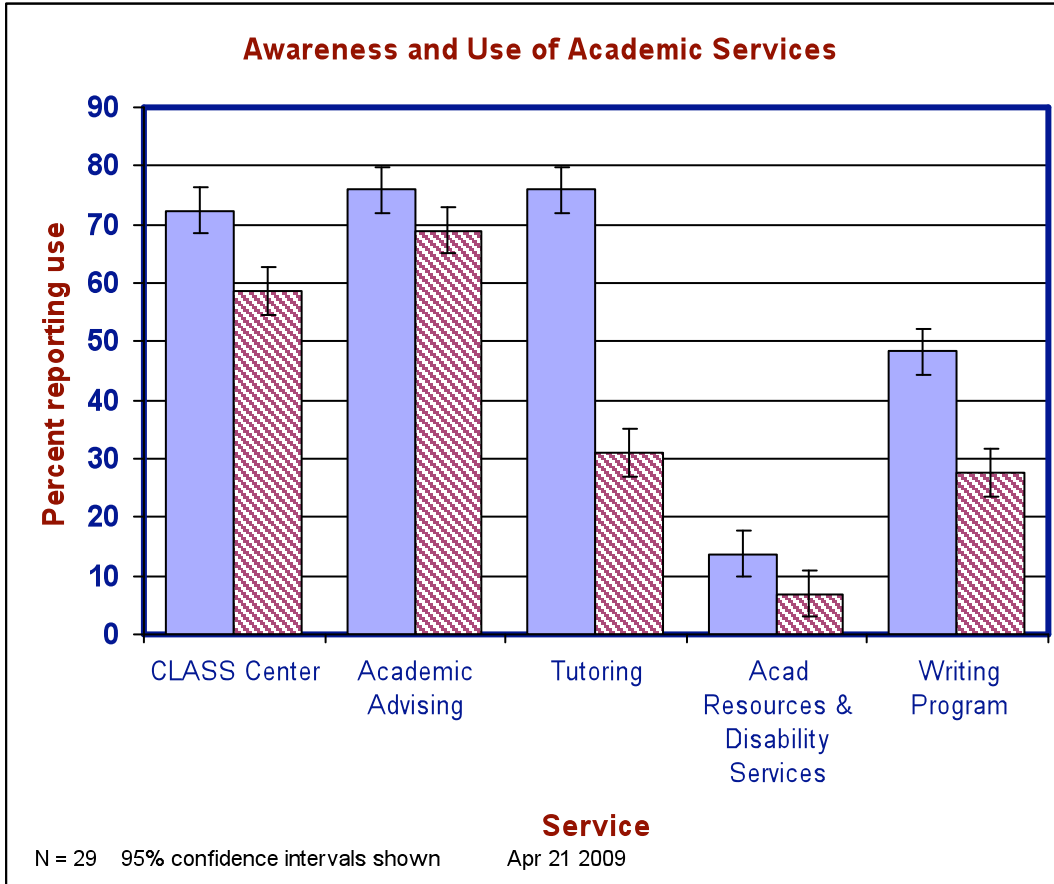
In order to reach Bean's (2006) request of research shedding light on how professionals understand the work of their discipline, more attention has to be focused on designing fluid approaches to gathering data. This research adds value to the conversation of effective strategies for engaging diverse student populations.
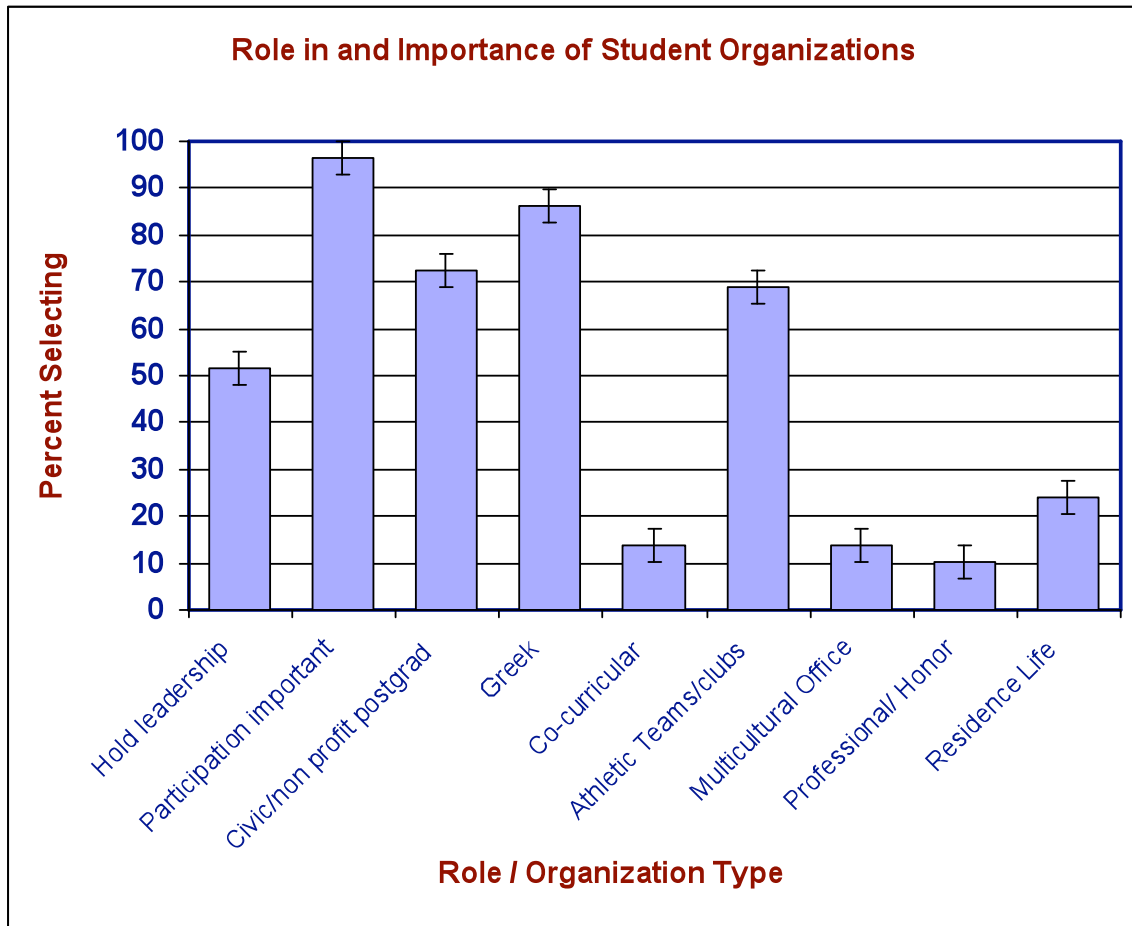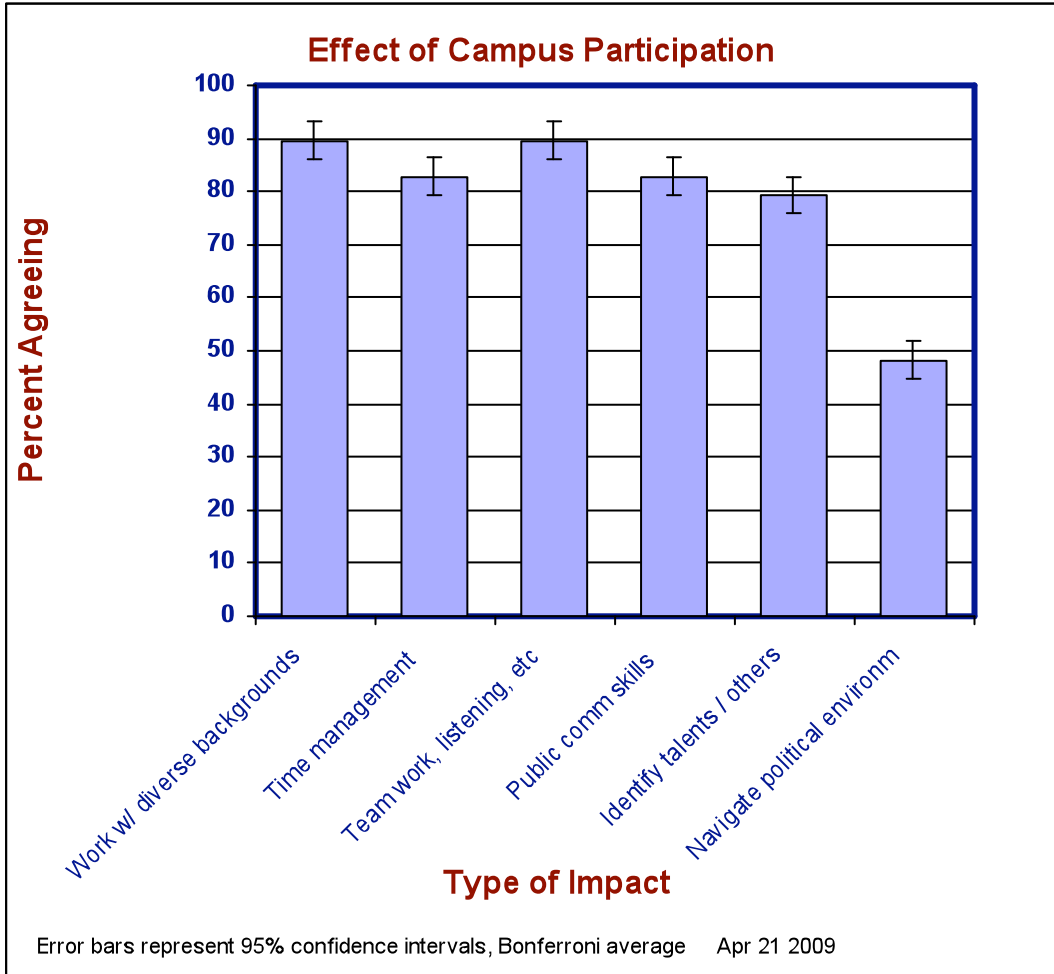
Appendix

Preparation for studies and campus climate by selected Olivet College students, Spring 2009

Error bars: 99.6% CI; allows six comparisons safelky   April 23 2009

Awareness and Use of Academic Services

Percent reporting use

90
80
70
60
50
40
30
20
10
0

CLASS Center | Academic Advising | Tutoring | Acad Resources & Disability Services | Writing Program

Service

N = 29   95% confidence intervals shown   Apr 21 2009

Role in and Importance of Student Organizations

Percent Selecting

Role / Organization Type

Hold leadership — Participation important — Civic/non profit postgrad — Greek — Co-curricular — Athletic Teams/clubs — Multicultural Office — Professional/ Honor — Residence Life

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