STUDENT BUSINESS ORGANIZATIONS: INVOLVEMENT STRATEGIES AND EXPECTATIONS

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ABSTRACT

Student business organizations within business schools play a vital role in preparing students to enter the professional business world. These organizations provide students with opportunities to apply leadership skills, as well as other management related skills. Additionally, these organizations may provide students with a linkage to the business community. The success of student business clubs depends heavily on student involvement. The degree of involvement may depend on the expectations of each student. The purpose of this paper is to offer involvement strategies based on the student expectations. A total of 450 surveys were collected from business students at a small four-year state supported university located in the Southeastern United States. The survey consisted of questions related to areas such as communications, interests, rewards, time of meeting, and expectations. Based on the results of the survey, strategies will be suggested to assist faculty advisors in maintaining strong professional clubs in schools of business.

INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE

Clubs can be defined as "an association of people with shared interests meeting in a specified place" (Dearlove, 2003). A key component of student expectations regarding business clubs pertains to the purpose for which the student is joining the club. According to John M. Butler in his article *Public Relations In Action: A View of the Benefits of Student Membership in Pre-Professional Organizations*, 1994, "Preprofessional organizations greatly aid the student in learning and utilizing the information taught in the classroom in a practical and professional atmosphere." This statement leads one to believe that membership by students would be for the knowledge obtained; however, Bettina A. Lankard in her article *Youth Organizations, Myths and Realities*, 1996, cites that "Students are very articulate about the benefits they have realized through participation. Research studies show participation in activities benefits

career development." This statement would indicate that the reasons students join organizations is to gain experience for their resumes. In addition, Lankard goes on to cite that students involved in youth organizations had higher leadership skills, and that the "primary goal of membership for these students is to develop competencies necessary for employment in a high performance economy" (Lankard, 1996). Clearly, the students are thinking of the future when joining business clubs at the college level. Their focus is on how membership in this organization will benefit them when interviewing and later working in the job profession that they have chosen.

However, it has been noted by those writing this article that student membership in business clubs and organizations is declining. Often, it is only a small percentage of the business students who join these organizations, provided their GPA makes them eligible. Then, if they do join, there are a declining number of returning students to the regularly scheduled meetings. The survey which was distributed to the business students at this small university asks several questions which could give insight as to why it is so difficult to maintain continued interest in the business club, and thereby have a substantial number attend regular meetings. Some of these questions include an analysis of the various forms of communication to not only the club members but also the student body as a whole. Based on the results of the survey, strategies will be suggested to assist the faculty advisors in maintaining strong professional clubs in schools of business.

METHODOLOGY

To obtain student's opinions about student business organizations, a questionnaire involving questions ranging from best means of communication, to interest and expectations was developed. Additional aspects such as meeting times, rewards and punishments as a means to improve participation and attendance were also considered but are not part of the present study. From a convenience sample of all the business classes (a captive population) 459 responses were collected, nine questionnaires were rejected for lack of completion or major errors, providing an effective return rate of 90.5%. Students were made aware of the purpose of the study and the voluntary nature of their participation. Proper research procedures were applied to assure the students' anonymity, the privacy of the information, and to avoid duplications in participation. Some classificatory questions were used to be able to evaluate potential differences between the participants.

PRESENTATION OF DATA

Table I describes the characteristics of the students sampled. Approximately 51% of the students were female and 49% of those students were male. Seventy five percent of the students were Caucasian, and 23% of the students were African American. About one-third of the students were juniors and 28% of the students were seniors. A good representation of lower classmen (39%) also was collected. The vast majority of those surveyed were full-time students. Forty-three percent of the students were in the

Marketing/Management emphasis, while the Accounting and Health Care Management emphasis accounted for 15% each. The Economics/Finance emphasis included 10% of the students and approximately 17% of those surveyed were not business majors. Most of the students were between the age of 20 and 22. Approximately two-thirds of the students worked either part-time or full-time. Of the students who are employed, 48% worked at least 20 hours per week.

Table I							
Sample Characteristics							
Description	**Gender**	**Class**	**Emphasis**	**Race**	**Student**	**Age**	**Work**	**H/Week**
Male	49%							
Female	51%							
Freshman		18%						
Sophomore		21%						
Junior		33%						
Senior		28%						
Accounting			15%					
Econ./Finance			10%					
HC Mgmt			15%					
Mgmt./Mktg.			43%					
Other			17%					
Caucasian				75%				
African American				23%				
Other				2%				
Full Time					97%			
Part time					3%			
17 – 19 years						25%		
20 – 22 years						61%		
23 or more years						14%		
Yes							67%	
No							33%	
At least 10								14%
At least 20								48%
At least 30								23%
More than 30								15%

Table II shows the different ways to communicate club activities to club members. "E-mail" received the highest percentage response in the "Excellent" ranking and received a total of 84% for both "Excellent" and "Good" combined. Other communication choices which received high marks from students were word of mouth, flyers, The Forum (the university newspaper), and personal letters. InfoBox and Telephone Contacts both received below a 50% response on the combined categories of "Excellent" and "Good" and were the least popular choices for students.

Table II
Communication to Club Members

Communication	Excellent	Good	Neutral	Bad	Worst
The Forum	23%	43%	28%	5%	1%
Flyers	26%	51%	20%	2%	1%
InfoBox	12%	23%	46%	16%	3%
Telephone Contacts	17%	30%	31%	17%	5%
Personal Letters	22%	41%	26%	8%	3%
Bulletin Boards	19%	44%	30%	5%	2%
Word of Mouth	28%	41%	21%	8%	2%
E-Mail	47%	37%	12%	3%	1%

Table III shows that activities that would interest students the most when involved in an organization. Forty-eight percent of the students were "very interested" in fieldtrips and another 41% were "interested" in fieldtrips. This was the top choice of the students' interests when combining the top two "interest" categories. Students also showed a strong interest in Social gatherings, which received an 86% combined total in these two categories. Luncheons/Dinners received a 79% total combined response and Guest Speakers received a 72% combined total in the first two interested categories. The bottom four activities and their percentage total for the top two "Interested" categories were Resume Analysis (61%), Environmental Projects (57%), Networking (55%) and Conferences/Seminars (45%).

Table III
Student Interests

Activities	Very Interested	Interested	Somewhat Interested	No Interest at All
Fieldtrips	46%	41%	11%	2%
Guest Speakers	22%	50%	24%	4%
Environmental Projects	14%	43%	32%	11%
Conferences/Seminars	12%	33%	36%	19%
Networking	21%	34%	35%	10%
Luncheons/Dinners	32%	47%	18%	3%
Resume Analysis	19%	42%	32%	7%
Social Gatherings	38%	48%	13%	1%

Table IV shows the student's expectation in joining a professional club. Gaining knowledge in a particular discipline was the top reason for the students. Students also like the idea of putting their club experience on their resume. Many companies which are looking for young leaders may put an emphasis on student leadership within a professional organization. Additionally, there is a social interaction aspect that most students are looking for in joining a club. The possibility of receiving some type of scholarship also is an expectation that many students have. Networking received the lowest response from students (65%); however, many students may associate networking

with developing contacts with other students. Networking with professional business people would certainly be a great advantage for students, and professional clubs should emphasize the importance of this opportunity. There is actually an organization called the Public Relations Student Society of America (PRSSA) that was established in 1968 for the sole purpose of establishing relationships between students and professional public relations practitioners. It also has a purpose of teaching public relations and professional attitudes (Pohl, 1994).

Table IV
Club Membership Expectations

Expectations	% of Students
Knowledge	90%
Experience for your Resume	86%
Social Interaction	75%
Recognition/Status	69%
Scholarships	67%
Networking	65%
Others	1%

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Using the proper means of communicating is essential to having a healthy professional business club. Based on the responses from the students; e-mail, word of mouth, the college newspaper, and flyers were considered to be the more effective ways to communicate activities to club members. Telephone contact and infoboxes were the least favored means of contact with club members. Club advisors and officers must continue to use and improve the most effective venues for communicating with members.

Business clubs must focus on Student interests if they are going to recruit and retain members. Club advisors and leaders should consider offering more fieldtrips, social gatherings, luncheons/dinners, and guest speakers. Obviously, students prefer more informal, social functions rather than the formal atmosphere of conferences and seminars. However, student interest also appears to be strong in resume analysis even though only 19% of the students were very interested in resume analysis. One area in which the authors thought would have a stronger response by the students was networking. Networking is often viewed as one of the strongest reasons to join a business club, especially if the networking is with business professionals. The lower than expected response by the students may be explained by the students interpreting the question as networking with other students instead of business professionals. It has been cited in other articles that one of the "attractions" of joining clubs is that "they allow members to rub shoulders with the great and the good…and they allow them to do so in an informal way" (Dearlove, 2003). Therefore, the current authors are certain that this response could be remedied in future analysis by clarification of the question.

We are a society that is obsessed with the idea of developing networks that will benefit future leaders and clients. Clubs have become about building and maintaining these relationships in communities and organizations (Dearlove, 2003). In order to do this, it is essential that business clubs maintain the interest of their members. This is done by proper communication, as well as programs and activities that attract the attention of current and potential members. Listening to the opinions of its members is essential because "Clubs offer one possible solution of getting to a very targeted audience in a positive environment" (Dearlove, 2003).

It will be interesting to explore, in a further study, those issues pertaining to improving attendance and participation. These two aspects provide an opportunity for business organizations to enhance their efficiency in managing the organization's activities and student involvement towards well defined goals. The authors are in the process of examining the previously mentioned aspects.

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