

Co-Curricular Learning and the Physical Campus

By Steven Brint

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Here is my thesis in a nutshell: While online courses could become – if they are not already -- an adequate substitute for face-to-face instruction, they cannot replace the learning that occurs in student clubs and organizations. Co-curricular learning is the distinctive advantage of the physical campus as an educational institution.

In academic year 2012 the average AAU public university campus supported one official student organization for approximately every 39 students, much better than the faculty-to-student ratio in many of these students' courses. Among the AAU publics, activist Berkeley was the leader in student clubs and organizations – no surprise there – numbering well over 1700. The average AAU private university campus supported one official student organization for every 18 students. Students at engineering schools (those that are promoting online everything) were the most active joiners on physical campuses: I found one student organization for every nine students at MIT and Cal Tech. Fewer student organizations exist on less selective four-year college campuses, but they are nevertheless numerous. In the California State University system, for example, the average number of students per student organization was 87 in 2012-13, with a range from 40:1 at outdoorsy CSU-Humboldt in the far north to 164:1 at working-class CSU-Los Angeles. Student clubs and organizations encompass a tremendous range. For example, even students whose interests lie entirely above ground can choose from among aviators, star gazers, bird watchers, basketball players, frisbee throwers, and quidditch enthusiasts for peers with whom to mingle on campus.

Just because they exist does not mean much is learned in them. Indeed, student organizations have a pretty bad rap in the recent literature on the college experience. Elizabeth Armstrong and Laura Hamilton's vibrant book suggests that some dorm floors and many sororities are important mainly as platforms for status displays and reinforcement of gender stereotypes, including as practice fields for upper-class feminine charm. Charlie Clotfelter's book on big-time college athletics shows that where prime-time athletics dominate the college scene, the student work week typically ends on Thursday, binge drinking is common, and arrests climb during football and basketball seasons. I confess that I have contributed to the disparagement. In a recent *LA Review of Books* essay bemoaning the frailty of student academic effort in the liberal arts, I observed that it is an expensive proposition to send one's children to schools with steadily increasing tuitions for the sake of four years of friendships, hooking up, and tailgating, activities attainable in other ways at a fraction of the price.

Now I repent. And I will admit that the online threat to the physical campus has been an important source of my interest in co-curricular learning. This new interest has led me, first of all, to search the scholarly literature for evidence about the educational outcomes of involvement in student clubs and organizations. This literature suggests that Elizabeth and Laura, Charlie Clotfelter, and Tom Wolfe's *I Am Charlotte Simmons*, have captured only part of the picture. Not surprisingly, Greek Life and inter-collegiate sports participation receive, at best, mixed marks in the research literature.

To the extent that we can trust it, the research literature suggests that quite a bit of learning relevant to later life success may occur in student clubs and organizations. Much of this learning is connected with the development of interpersonal skills. Kuh (1995), for example, showed that students' self-reports of gains during the college years in "interpersonal confidence"

and “humanitarianism” were associated with leadership experiences in student clubs and organizations. Others have shown similar results for members as well as leaders (see, e.g., Dugan 2006; Foubert and Grainger 2006; Hood 1984; Holzweiss, Rahn, and Wickline 2007; Pascarella, Seifert, and Blaich 2009).

By contrast, only a few researchers have investigated the relationships between participation in co-curricular activities and cognitive gains. In studies of single institutions, Gellin (1998) and Tsui (1998) reported significant effects of participation in clubs and organizations on critical thinking using standard assessment instruments such as the Watson-Glaser Critical Thinking Appraisal and the Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency. Kuh (1995) showed a relationship between student self-reports of gains during the college years in “reflective thought” and “capacity to apply knowledge” and leadership in student clubs and organizations. To the extent that these statistical associations are valid and reliable – a big if -- the reasons for them may stem from the nature of the challenges students face in accomplishing their objectives in student organizations. Students who participate in clubs and organizations encounter both interpersonal and organizational issues that require them to evaluate several courses of action and to choose a preferable course. These evaluations and judgments have a clear relationship to critical thinking. And they are likely to occur more frequently among those who lead student clubs and organizations than among those who are members only.

I am personally much more interested than previous researchers in specific skills that students may sharpen through their experiences in student clubs and organizations. My colleagues in the SERU Consortium and I are now in the process of examining co-curricular learning experiences by asking students about the frequency with which they have engaged in specific activities. The survey asks students to identify the number of times during the previous

academic year that they engaged in the following because of their involvement in a student club or organization: chaired a meeting; planned an event; promoted or marketed an event; led or facilitated a discussion; made a presentation that required research; prepared a budget; recruited new members for the organization/club; written a report or article; collected or analyzed data; designed or produced a product for sale; invited or hosted a speaker; written a constitution, bylaws, piece of legislation or rules; mediated a dispute; created an artistic work or performance; engaged in an in-depth discussion about a local, state, national, or international issue; worked with another student as a peer educator or peer mentor; created or updated a website or webpage; and partnered with a community organization or organized community outreach. Of course, simply doing something does not mean that anything very important is learned. It is possible to develop bad habits in running meetings as much as real skill. On the other hand, not doing something is usually a more decisive inhibitor to learning than the actual experience doing it!

We also ask about how important involvement in student clubs and organizations has been to specific character outcomes. These outcomes include: learning to meet deadlines; becoming more dependable and reliable; learning how to resolve disputes; maintaining ethical standards when they are challenged; developing an ability to work with others to accomplish a goal; developing knowledge of how organizations work; understanding how to succeed in competitive situations; developing listening skills; developing emotional self-control; applying what in-class lessons to solving real world problems; developing a willingness to argue a position against others who have different views; developing networking skills; learning how to use technology more effectively; developing oral presentation skills; developing written expression skills; developing or practicing quantitative/data analysis skills; developing an ability to teach others.

Alas, the results will not be available until next fall when Allison Cantwell and I intend to report on them. Stay tuned.

Sidney Verba, Kay Scholzman, and Henry Brady's wonderful book, *Voice and Equality*, was one influence on my recovered respect for co-curricular learning and my approach to studying it. Verba and his co-authors discovered that participation in community organizations, such as church groups and parent-teacher associations, are the source of what they call civic skills. These are the places where adults who have never had the opportunity – or are out of practice – learn to speak up about issues, create persuasive messages, work with others to reach a goal, and develop skills in the development of mailing lists and spreadsheets. Why wouldn't the organizations of our campus communities perform similar functions? If we don't care to rely on Sidney Verba for authority that they probably do, we can go back to all the way back to Tocqueville. He said it in the 19th century, marveling at our nation of joiners as something new under the sun.

We have to ask whether the advocates of an online future for higher education will be clever enough to figure out an analog – or should I say “digilog” -- to the student clubs and organizations we find on physical campuses. It is possible to imagine a future in which online chat rooms or face-to-face affinity hubs complement computer-based instruction. We can imagine further that these chat rooms or hubs might focus on the generation, implementation and funding of exciting new ideas, as so many Silicon Valley gatherings do. If they are designed according to Silicon Valley specs, we might find these substitutes encouraging a more entrepreneurial and creative future for people who receive their formal instruction online.

But would we lose something too in such a transition? The physical campus is an environment in which students can test out a multitude of selves. This would require a lot of hubs, and how many would profit-seeking hub organizers really want to support? In the physical campus environment students can accomplish more than business and creative goals. Because the payoffs are not as obvious, I imagine social and civic goals might easily wither in an out-of-class environment composed of chat rooms or affinity hubs. And, perhaps most important, on the physical campus students can feel the emotional impact they have on others and the emotional impact others have on them, and they can monitor and try to control how their bodies react to different types of interactions. Where mind, body, and emotions must be integrated for young people to become high-functioning adults, there's probably no substitute for physical campus environments filled with many different types of people jostling one another for space, giving up space to better ideas, and finding lots of different reasons for collaboration and opposition.