

A Pilot Assessment of Student Leader Involvement in Campus Organizations: Be True to Your School?

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Abstract

Students who self-identified as activity leaders of one ($n = 30$), two or more ($n = 21$), or no campus extracurricular clubs ($n = 34$), completed measures on the institution's mission and values as well as its school sense of community (SSOC). Analyses indicated a main effect for race on SSOC and a subscale emphasis on diversity, such that Caucasian students reported a higher sense of community while students of color felt the need for stronger emphasis on diversity across campus. An additional main effect for activity type and SSOC was also evident, since students with leadership roles in two or more clubs reported a stronger sense of community than regular club members or students active in only one club. Results highlight how participation in co-curricular activities by students of color may potentially inhibit or enhance a sense of community on campus and indicate how much emphasis the university places on honoring diversity at all levels of the college.

Introduction

In his book *The Dying of the Light*, Burtchaell¹ discussed the indirect and slow erosion of institutional mission statements by the

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¹ J.T. Burtchaell, *The Dying of the Light: The Disengagement of Colleges and Universities from Their Christian Churches* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Erdmans Publishing, 1998).

disengagement of private colleges and universities from their church affiliations. Mission statements that once included words like “values, morals, and congregational affiliations” now give way to words like “independent, coeducational, and residential.” Nevertheless, mission statements are an organization’s means of publicly proclaiming for critical assessment the institution’s objectives, expectations, and values.² Within higher education settings, mission statements focus the energies of employees to balance the relationship between educational goals and the needs of the outside world, and integrate objectives held by diverse stakeholders (e.g., administrators, faculty, and staff), which enables everyone to work toward common goals.³ Institutional missions may be conveyed through administrative operations, academic programs and policies, and student services.⁴ They identify the institution’s intentions to accomplish goals, and its premise for action.⁵

The skills and competencies acquired through higher education that reflect the institution’s mission and values may impact student development.⁶ For instance, if a university in its mission statement claims to promote and foster public service, intellectual integrity, critical thinking skills, moral and civic development, and racial and religious tolerance, then it is important to evaluate whether such virtues are actualized and realized by students.⁷ Evaluating the degree to

² Barbara A. Holland, “From Murky to Meaningful: The Role of Mission in Institutional Change,” in *Colleges and Universities as Citizens*, eds. Robert G. Bringle, et al. (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1999), 48-73.

³ Gary A. Berg, et al., *Mission Possible? Enabling Good Work in Higher Education* (Washington, DC: Heldref, 2003).

⁴ Joseph R. Ferrari and Shaun E. Cowman, “Toward a Reliable and Valid Measure of Institutional Mission and Values Perception: “The DePaul Values Inventory,”” *Journal of Beliefs and Values* 25 (2004): 43-54; Joseph R. Ferrari and Jessica Velcoff, “Measuring Staff Perceptions of University Identity and Activities: The Mission and Values Inventory,” *Christian Higher Education* 5 (2006): 243-261; Joseph R. Ferrari and Jessica Velcoff, “Perceptions of a University Mission Statement by Senior Administrators: Relating to Faculty Engagement,” *Christian Higher Education* 5 (2006): 1-11.

⁵ Daniel J. Rowley, et al., *Strategic Change in Colleges and Universities: Planning to Survive and Prosper* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997).

⁶ Ferrari, “Toward a Reliable and Valid,” 43-54; Joseph R. Ferrari, et al., “Impact of School Sense of Community within a Faith-Based University: Staff and Faculty Perceptions on Institutional Mission and Values,” *Social Psychology of Education* 12 (2009).

⁷ Thomas Ehrlich, “The Impact of Higher Education on Moral and Civic Responsibility,” *Journal of College and Character* 2 (2000): 1-11; John N. Gardner, “Focusing on the First-Year Student,” (n.p., 2001). EDRS Document Reproduction Service No. ED458865; Mark J. Halstead and Monica J. Taylor, “Learning and Teaching About Values: A Review of Recent Research,” *Cambridge Journal of Education* 30 (2000): 169-202.

which an institution's mission and values affect new students may be helpful in the review of educational policies and administrative operations, in ascertaining the impact of community-based service programs,⁸ and in assessing identifiable benchmarks of the school.⁹

Institutional values reflect the identifiable benchmarks of the organization; in higher education settings, they influence goals and outcomes, as well as procedural operations, which reflect to students, staff, faculty, and administration the identifiable benchmarks of the organization.¹⁰ In the present study, we explored how our university expresses its mission, vision, and values specifically to *student leaders of extracurricular activities*. We examined how student leaders of one organization compared to leaders of two or more organizations or to students who are involved in campus activities but are not leaders. These student groups were compared on their perception of the institution's values of innovation, inclusiveness, risk-taking, pragmatism, and diversity; their perception of the institution's mission of social justice and community service; and the relationship between those perceptions and their sense of school community. A school that believes critical thinking and community service are two important aspects of a higher education at that institution should communicate those convictions to its student leaders.¹¹ Therefore, understanding how student leaders, especially those of color, experience a school's sense of community and the institution's mission through campus programs and activities is an important point for educational assessment.

Despite the educational literature cited above, few studies examine students' perceptions of their higher education institution's mission. Rapp¹² assessed first-year student expectations, perceptions, emotions, and knowledge about the university. Results showed that 50% of the time, students held misperceptions about the university, and these

⁸ David D. Dill, "Focusing Institutional Mission to Provide Coherence and Integration," in *Planning and Management for a Changing Environment*, eds. M.W. Peterson et al. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997), 171-191.

⁹ Ferrari, "Toward a Reliable and Valid," 43-54; Ferrari, "Measuring Staff Perceptions," 243-261.

¹⁰ Ferrari "Toward a Reliable and Valid," 43-54; Joseph W. Filkins and Joseph R. Ferrari, "The DePaul Values Project: An Ongoing Assessment of Students' Perceptions of a Private University's Core Mission and Values," in *Assessing Character Outcome in College*, eds. J.C. Dalton et al. (New Jersey: Jossey-Bass, Inc., 2004), 81-91.

¹¹ Ferrari, "Measuring Staff Perceptions," 243-261.

¹² S.P. Rapp, "Experiences of First-Year Students Regarding the Personal, Social, and Academic Expectations of a Private Midwestern University," *Dissertation Abstracts International* 61 (2000): 1-A.

misperceptions increased the gap between students' expectations and experiences. Rapp suggested that bridging this gap between first-year students' expectations and experiences at the university may lead to better retention rates. Other studies suggest that racial identity may influence students' adjustment to their college institution.¹³ Students of color who attend predominantly Caucasian universities have a stronger commitment to and pride in their racial group, a higher level of cultural awareness, more adaptive personal resources such as leadership and efficacy, and better psychosocial adjustment than Caucasian students.¹⁴ The present study explores whether the level of student affairs involvement (i.e., the number of clubs in which a person holds a leadership position) by students of color has an impact on their reported pride in and commitment to the school's mission, vision, and values.

Among faith-based colleges and universities (especially Catholic institutions), one of the primary interests of student affairs departments is to transmit to students the values, philosophy, and faith teachings of the institution, regardless of a student's religious preference. Studies conducted to understand students' faith development at a Baptist institution revealed that the college environment promoted faith development (i.e., the values upon which the institution was founded) and affected students' decision-making strategies toward everyday life choices.¹⁵ Another study found that students enrolled in faith-based colleges and universities more frequently engage in community service than students enrolled in secular institutions.¹⁶

¹³ Shouping Hu and George D. Kuh, "Diversity Experience and College Student Learning and Personal Development," *Journal of College Student Development* 44 (2003): 320-334; Shouping Hu and George D. Kuh, "Maximizing What Students Get Out of College: Testing a Learning Productivity Model," *Journal of College Student Development* 44 (2003): 185-203.

¹⁴ Alicia F. Chavez et al., "Learning to Value the 'Other': A Framework of Individual Diversity Development," *Journal of College Student Development* 44 (2003): 453-469; A.D. Coleman, "Multidimensional Racial Identity and Self-Esteem of African American College Students," *Dissertation Abstracts International* 60 (2000): 12-B.

¹⁵ L.L. Newman, "Faith and Freshmen: A Qualitative Analysis of Faith Development of Traditional First-Year Students at a Baptist Institution," *Dissertation Abstracts International* 60 (1999): 4-A.

¹⁶ Cynthia A. Low and Paul J. Handal, "The Relationship Between Religion and Adjustment to College," *Journal of College Student Development* 36 (1996): 406-412; Newman, "Faith and Freshmen," 4-A; Robert C. Serow and Julia I. Dreyden, "Community Service Among College and University Students: Individual and Institutional Relationships," *Adolescence* 25 (1990): 553-566.

DePaul's Mission Statement

DePaul University is a private, teaching university with over 23,000 students educated across several metropolitan campuses in the Chicago area. The university's benchmark identity is as an "*urban, Catholic, and Vincentian*" institution, and it expresses its vision through the values inherent to these concepts. The *urban* mission and values of the university are expressed by delivering quality education to locations in and immediately around the city of Chicago, as the university's goal is to emphasize education for working-class, first generation college students. The university expresses its *Catholic* mission and values through direct service to the poor and economically disenfranchised and promotes student engagement in volunteer and community service directed at impoverished communities. Programs exist that permit the campus community to practice either Catholicism or other religious practices such as Islamic and Hebrew studies.¹⁷ Murphy¹⁸ noted that although it is a Roman Catholic school of higher education, DePaul University invoked *Vincentianism* (referring to the namesake of the school, St. Vincent DePaul) through respect for human dignity, diversity, and individual "personalism."¹⁹

In the present pilot study, we focused our research on gaining a more complete understanding of institutional perceptions and a sense of community among student activity members of white versus non-white ethnic identities and among students with different amounts of organizational leadership responsibility. In the present study, we define *diversity* in terms of traditional, secular usage based on racial or ethnic differences; religious affiliation was not considered. The university campus is predominantly Caucasian. Therefore, comparing racial differences among student leaders of color (African-American, Hispanic / Latino, and Asian / Pacific Islander) with Caucasian leaders might elucidate perceptions of the university's mission and values, which promote

¹⁷ Louise Sullivan, *The Core Values of Vincentian Education* (Niagara, NY: Niagara University Press, 1997). Anthony J. Dosen, *Catholic Higher Education in the 1960s: Issues of Identity, Issues of Governance* (Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, 2009).

¹⁸ J. Patrick Murphy, *Visions and Values in Catholic Higher Education* (Kansas City, MO: Sheed & Ward, 1991).

¹⁹ Sullivan, *The Core Values*; Dosen, *Catholic Higher Education*.

acceptance of diverse populations.²⁰ Furthermore, the present study compared three groups of students—student leaders of only one organization, student leaders of more than one organization, and students with no leadership role—on their perceptions of the university’s mission and values and their sense of school community. As this was an exploratory study, we had no expectations on self-reported perceptual differences on institutional mission or a school’s sense of community based on the amount of leadership a student experiences.

Method

Participants

A total of 85 undergraduate extracurricular activity members (52 women, 33 men; M age = 20.66 years old, SD = 3.69) participated in a student affairs survey. All students were affiliated with the same medium sized, faith-based, urban, midwestern university serving over 23,000 students across three main campuses located in and around Chicago, IL, with most participants (74%) from the metropolitan residential campus. Participants reported an average cumulative GPA of 3.32 (SD = 0.39) and were majoring in a variety of liberal arts and professional programs (e.g., business, music, education). Most participants (98.3%) were not transfer students and just over half were upper-division students (58.2%).

We categorized participants based on their self-reported level of *leadership involvement* in these extracurricular, campus-recognized clubs or societies. A total of 120 clubs exist on campus, and participants in the present study reflected a good representation of all these student organizations. There were 30 students who reported a leadership role (President, Vice-President, Treasurer, or Secretary) in one campus activity. Another 21 students reported that they were in similar leadership roles for 2 or more campus recognized activities. A third group of 34 students stated that they were involved in a campus club but not in a leadership role. On average, participants reported that they were active in 2.23 clubs (SD = 1.70), providing service within each organization for

²⁰ Chavez, “Learning to Value,” 453-466; Hu, “Diversity Experience and College,” 320-334; Hu, “Maximizing what Students,” 185-203; R.T. Sanders, Jr., “Intellectual and Psychosocial Predictors of Success in the College Transition: A Multi-Ethnic Study of Freshmen Students on a Predominantly White Campus,” *Dissertation Abstracts International* 58 (1998).

2.65 hours per week ($SD = 3.14$), plus working at a part-time job for 10.14 hours per week ($SD = 11.36$).

In addition, participants were labeled *students of color* ($n = 40$) if they indicated an ethnic identity other than Caucasian (African-American, Latino/a, Asian-American, Native American, or Indian); students were labeled *Caucasian* if they self-identified as such ($n = 45$). We did not focus on more specific ethnic breakdowns because there were too few individuals within each group. Consequently, the present study is exploratory and more of a pilot project in the area of student engagement at Catholic universities.

Psychometric Scales

All participants completed the 11-item *School Sense of Community* scale by Hagbord.²¹ We chose to use the short version of the scale in the present study in order to reduce response fatigue among participants, given the lengthy set of items assessed. With the present sample, coefficient alpha on the brief *SSOC* scale was 0.87.

In addition, all participants completed 16 items from Ferrari and Velcoff's²² *DePaul Mission and Values (DMV)* Instrument, a measure²³ reflective of mission statements among contemporary urban, faith-based Catholic higher education institutions. Ten items inquired to what extent respondents perceived the university as *inclusive and innovative*; more specifically, this speaks to how the institution is innovative in operational procedures, is inclusive of persons from all backgrounds, takes risks in an entrepreneurial way, is pragmatic in educational focus, remains relevant in a changing society, keeps its urban identity, and fosters mutual understanding and respect for others. The other six items reflected the *Catholic pluralism* aspects of the mission, relating to the university's goals of inviting all faiths to examine Catholicism and other faiths, providing curricula on Catholicism and

²¹ Winston J. Hagbord, "An Exploration of School Membership among Middle- and High-School Students," *Journal of Psychoeducational Assessment* 12 (1994): 312-323; Winston J. Hagbord, "An Investigation of a Brief Measure of School Membership," *Adolescence* 33 (1998): 461-468.

²² Ferrari, "Measuring Staff Perceptions," 243-261.

²³ Ferrari, "Impact of School Sense of Community"; Joseph R. Ferrari and Patrick Janulis, "Embracing the Mission: Catholic and Non-Catholic Faculty and Staff Perceptions of Institutional Mission and School Sense of Community," *Journal of Catholic Higher Education* 28.2 (2009): 115-124.

other faiths, and offering ministry and programs for Catholicism and other faiths while expressing its primary religious heritage. With the present sample, coefficient alpha was 0.90 and 0.86, respectively, for the institution as innovative and inclusive and the Catholic pluralism subscales.

Participants also completed the *DePaul Values Inventory*,²⁴ a measure that assesses students' perceptions of a university's mission and values.²⁵ The *DeVI* subscale, called *institutional values* (9 items; present sample alpha = 0.86), consisted of questions that related to understanding the university's overall mission and values as an urban, faith-based university. The *emphasis on diversity* subscale (3 items; present sample alpha = 0.87) assessed whether students believed the administration acts on its mission of including diversity by actively recruiting persons of color and women as faculty and staff. The *general altruistic campus atmosphere* subscale (7 items; present sample alpha = 0.90) assessed to what extent students perceived that the university respects the dignity of others through a campus culture or climate that is supportive and altruistic. The *life-long commitment to education and values* subscale (6 items; present sample alpha = 0.85) examined whether students believed that the values of learning and community service would continue to influence their lives after graduation.²⁶

In addition, participants completed Reynold's²⁷ revised *Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale—Form C*, a 13-item true/false one-dimensional measure assessing a respondent's global tendency to give socially appropriate responses. This self-report inventory was used in previous studies to tap perceptions of one's institution.²⁸ With the present sample, the overall coefficient alpha was 0.77.

²⁴ Ferrari, "Toward a Reliable and Valid Measure," 43-54.

²⁵ Ibid.; Filkins, "The DePaul Values Project,"; Joseph R. Ferrari and Maya J. Bristow, "Are We Helping Them Serve Others? Student Perceptions of Campus Altruism in Support of Community Service," *Education* 125 (2005): 404-413; Joseph R. Ferrari et al., "Looking Good or Being Good? The Role of Social Desirability Tendencies in Student Perceptions of Institutional Mission and Values," *College Student Journal* 39 (2005): 7-13.

²⁶ Ferrari, "Toward a Reliable and Valid Measure," 43-54; Filkins, "The DePaul Values Project"; Ferrari, "Looking Good or Being Good," 7-13.

²⁷ William M. Reynolds, "Development of Reliable and Short Forms of the Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale," *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 38 (1982): 119-125.

²⁸ Ferrari, "Impact of School Sense of Community"; Ferrari, "Embracing the Mission".

Procedures

Small group testing sessions of 10-15 students were held by staff from the university's Student Affairs office during the start of a club meeting for each organization. After returning a signed consent form, participants completed a demographic sheet (e.g., primary campus of involvement, club affiliation, number of clubs involved, leadership role in each club, and the number of hours worked per club and at an off-campus part-time job). The sequence of the *SSOC*, *DeVI*, *DMV*, and social desirability scales were counterbalanced to control for order and fatigue effects. It took participants less than thirty minutes to complete all items.

Results

Preliminary analyses indicated that none of the subscales was significantly related to social desirability, so no further analysis of this variable was conducted (see Table 1 for the average score for each scale and its correlation with social desirability for student leaders of one club, leaders of two or more clubs, and non-leaders).

Multivariate Analyses

To determine the effect of club participation and race, results from items assessing students' sense of community, perceptions of institutional inclusiveness and innovation, and belief in Catholic pluralism on campus were entered into multivariate analyses (Wilk's λ criterion). *Multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA)* is often used when two or more dependent variables are examined.²⁹ A *MANOVA*, like univariate analysis of variance, allows for the examination of main effects and interactions among the variables in question. In addition, a *MANOVA* may be used when the researcher needs to calculate numerous t-tests based on multiple dependent variables. The statistic most often used with a *MANOVA* is called Wilk's lambda. Wilk's lambda is comparable to the *F* statistic found in univariate analysis.³⁰

²⁹ G. Barbara Tabachnick and Linda S. Fidell, *Using Multivariate Statistics*, Fifth Edition (Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon, 2007).

³⁰ *Ibid.*

Table 1. Mean Score and Zero-order Correlates with Social Desirability on Each Psychometric Scale for Student Leadership Categories.

	STUDENT LEADERSHIP GROUP			
	Social Desirability	Non-Leader (n=34)	Leader, 1 Club (n=30)	Leader, > 2 Clubs (n=21)
School Sense of Community	.118	38.50 (5.99)	41.27 (8.37)	43.86 * (6.31)
DMV / innovative & inclusive	.057	51.03 (8.22)	49.73 (13.89)	47.86 (10.71)
DMV / Catholic pluralism	.089	30.88 (6.19)	29.87 (7.98)	29.05 (5.58)
DeVI / institutional values	.054	53.77 (8.64)	52.77 (13.85)	50.10 (9.27)
DeVI / express campus diversity	.103	13.62 (5.14)	15.53 (4.51)	16.00 (4.44)
DeVI / pro-social campus setting	.138	38.38 (8.16)	36.60 (10.42)	34.23 (10.77)
DeVI / lifelong commitment to values	.087	30.62 (6.13)	32.47 (7.12)	31.48 (7.85)

Both *leader type* and *race* variables were significant ($\lambda = 0.79$ and $\lambda = 0.69$, respectively) at $p < .01$. No significant interaction effects for both the *DMV* and the *DeVI* subscales were obtained; however, there was a significant main effect for *leader type* and *SSOC*, $F_{(2,78)} = 5.26$, $p < .01$. Students who held leadership roles in two or more campus clubs reported a greater sense of community on campus than students who were leaders of one or no campus club (see Table 1).

Furthermore, there was a significant main effect for *race* and the second *DeVI* subscale, stating that the campus should have a greater emphasis on diversity, $F_{(1,78)} = 5.49$, $p < .01$, and the *SSOC rating*, $F_{(1,78)} = 6.59$, $p < .01$. Mean scores on each self-reported measure by both racial groups are reported in Table 2. As shown in the table, when compared overall to Caucasian students, students of color perceived that the university should have a greater emphasis on diversity and that there is less of a sense of community. However, students of color did not differ on their perceptions of the institution's values, the pro-social campus setting, or their commitment to lifelong learning.

Discussion

This brief pilot study indicates that students who are engaged in the university's campus-related activities may perceive campus life both

Table 2. Mean Score on Institutional Mission / Values and School Sense of Community by Race for Leaders and Engaged Students.

	Race	
	White (<i>n</i> =45)	Non-White (<i>n</i> =40)
School Sense of Community	42.27 (5.81)	39.15* (8.33)
DMV / innovative & inclusive	51.71 (11.73)	47.63 (9.92)
DMV / Catholic pluralism	31.18 (7.27)	28.83 (5.86)
DeVI / institutional values	53.36 (10.60)	51.40 (11.20)
DeVI / express campus diversity	13.45 (4.99)	15.43** (4.16)
DeVI / pro-social campus setting	38.31 (9.08)	34.95 (10.16)
DeVI / lifelong commitment to values	32.22 (7.47)	31.65 (6.18)

n = 85

**p* = .05

***p* < .01

Note. Value in parenthesis is standard deviation.

similarly and differently, depending on the subscale. For instance, on many of our measures of mission (e.g., Catholic pluralism, institutional values, pro-social campus setting, and lifelong commitment to values), Caucasian students and students of color (independent of social desirability responses) evaluated the situation in a similar manner. Both groups of students saw the university as inclusive of other faith practices, valuing of the dignity of each person, promoting of altruistic values, and encouraging of a life of social engagement and justice. However, students of color at the university viewed the campus community as somewhat deficient in terms of—and expressed a desire for more—campus diversity. Perhaps, because the student population at the present university is mostly Caucasian (even though the percentage of students of color is at 40-45%), persons of color do not feel that they are included in all the campus life offered unless there is a greater representation of persons among the administration with whom they can identify.

These results concerning students of color suggest that higher education administrators need to focus on ways to increase this student population's inclusion and school sense of community. Previous research

demonstrated that racial identity impacts the adjustment of students to their university.³¹ The present study supports previous research in that the current participants felt there needed to be greater expression of ethnic diversity on campus. The present study also extends those studies by demonstrating that students of color may feel less of a school sense of community with peers and the administration.

Regardless of their race, in the present study, student leaders of two or more campus clubs reported a stronger sense of community on campus than did leaders of one club or students who were engaged but non-leaders. These results suggest that students highly engaged in campus life will feel connected with the university.

The present study, however, has several limitations making the outcomes more exploratory than confirmatory. For instance, the small, nonrandom sample and the limited duration of the study (i.e., survey data collected in one measurement wave and not longitudinally) prevent us from making strong conclusive statements about student leaders in campus organizations. The study also was conducted at a single Catholic institution. The urban, faith-based institutional context could have influenced our findings.

Nevertheless, higher education officials might consider increasing the number of student leadership opportunities to help students feel better connected to the university. Moving beyond differences among racial groups, we believe this logical but important result provides new direction for future research.

In sum, the present study provides some initial insight into student development within an urban, middle-sized, faith-based teaching university. Future studies might explore whether perceptions of the school's sense of community, as well as the school's mission, vision, and values, differ among groups of student leaders and non-leaders. Larger samples of randomly assigned and selected student members would facilitate the generalization of the present exploratory outcomes. Regardless, the present study demonstrates that compared to Caucasians, students of color may have perceptions of their school that might affect the campus climate for all stakeholders.

³¹ Hu, "Diversity Experience and College," 320-334; Hu, "Maximizing What Students," 185-203.