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# An examination of the perception, role and impact of student-led clubs and organizations on student development, engagement and success: a small-sample study of extreme users and extreme non-users using service innovation methods

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An examination of the perception, role and impact of student-led clubs and organizations on student development, engagement and success: a small-sample study of extreme users and extreme non-users using service innovation methods

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## Introduction

This research concerns Student-Led Clubs and Organizations (hereafter, “SLCOs”). I define an SLCO as a club or organization that primarily operates, meets, or practices on the school’s campus and that is officially registered as an organization with their school, as reflected in the club or organization’s inclusion in the system housing the school’s data about student-led clubs and organizations. Thus, informal organizations and clubs or those that are not formally registered with the school were not considered in this study.

This research concerns two areas of interest regarding SLCOs. First, I wanted to research what involvement in student-led clubs and organizations (SLCOs) contributes to student development, engagement, and success. Second, I wanted to understand the perceptions that students at the University of Tennessee-Chattanooga have about SLCOs and their impact on the students’ development, engagement, and success.

To focus my research, I posed three research questions: 1) What is the perception of SLCOs from the perspective of both uninvolved students and extremely involved students? 2) What drives students to become engaged in SLCOs? 3) What impact does involvement in SLCOs have on students’ development and success? My goal in conducting this research was to contribute to both theoretical questions and a practical problem.

The theoretical questions informing this research concern the relationship between SLCOs and student development, engagement and success. The academic research on these topics is vast and is often used to address and inform conversations and practices in higher education regarding issues such as student engagement, student success, student retention and

persistence, and students' overall satisfaction with their college experience. I discovered, however, that very little of this research addresses the role that SLCOs play.

The practical problem that informs this research arose out of my own involvement in, and leadership of, SLCOs at UTC. I observed that SLCOs of all types at UTC appeared to struggle significantly with recruiting and retaining members. I also talked to students who expressed a desire to experience a greater sense of community at UTC. Yet many of those same students were either not aware of, or were not interested in becoming involved in, SLCOs.

Having been taught, as an Entrepreneur major, to identify gaps in the market and in the community around me as an opportunity for growth that can be capitalized upon, I framed this gap-- between SLCOs looking for student members and UTC students looking for communities to which they might belong-- as an entrepreneurial opportunity. These two groups of people, who seemed to need each other, seemed strangely unable to connect. I wanted to know why and what I and my fellow SLCO leaders and members could do to improve our recruitment, retention, and engagement of students at UTC. I hypothesized that if I could research and understand students' perceptions of SLCOs, as well as the impact that SLCOs do and can have on student development, engagement and ultimately, student success, then I would be able to identify reliable insights that could inform innovations by SLCOs aimed at improving their recruitment, retention and engagement of student members. Informed by my innovation intent, I selected research methods drawn from innovation methodologies.

As noted briefly above, my research into the theoretical and research literature on SLCOs and their impact on student development, engagement and success led to a surprising discovery. I found that despite the extensive research on student development, engagement and success, very little examines student involvement in student-led clubs and organizations. We know very little

about why students join SLCOs, what drives their engagement in SLCOs, what makes SLCOs successful, what students think about them, and what impact SLCOs have on students development and success. This research aims to begin filling these gaps and identify areas for further investigation. The research was inspired by a real-world problem that I noticed as a student at the University of Tennessee-Chattanooga.

Furthermore, as I undertook my research and began systematically observing and analyzing students' behavior regarding SLCOs, I became increasingly interested in understanding what drives the quality of students' involvement in SLCOs. My interest in the quality of student involvement stands in contrast to the approach adopted by almost all the research that I reviewed. The standard approach to the study of student involvement in SLCOs appears to be mainly quantitatively focused and with a binary interest, that is, whether or not students are involved in an SLCO, and if so, how many times a week, semester or year they participate. In contrast, I wanted to know what accounts for a high-quality involvement, that is, an involvement that has a significant impact on students' development, engagement, and their success as a student.

My qualitative and practical interests informed my choice of methods. For example, rather than sending out a survey to see how many students attended SLCO meetings and if so, how many and how often, I chose to interview SLCO members to understand the qualitative dimensions of their experience. Based on my innovator's hunch, I hypothesized that the quality of a students' involvement in an SLCO would prove to be one of the most factors determining a student's development, engagement, and overall satisfaction with their college experience.

I have structured this research paper in five (5) sections. In the first section, I review the literature that informed this research and its methodology. In the second section, I discuss the

methods I used, detailing how the data was collected and analyzed. In the third section, I examine the results of the research. In the fourth section, I discuss those results and address their potential contribution to the theory and practice of student development and engagement. In the final section, I close the paper by noting the limitations of this study and then offer suggestions for further research.

## Literature Review

The study of student development in higher education, which has proliferated since its inception in the late 1970s, can mostly be organized around four key questions that appear to guide most of the research in this field<sup>1</sup>:

1. What interpersonal and intrapersonal changes occur while the student is in college?
2. What factors lead to this development?
3. What aspects of the college environment encourage or retard growth?
4. What developmental outcomes should be achieved in college?

My research, as it pertains to student development, addresses the third question, that is, how Student-Led Organizations and Clubs, which are a distinct part of the college environment, encourage growth.

Numerous studies have shown that involvement in SLCOs positively impacts student development and that they do so in a variety of ways.<sup>2</sup> SLCOs have been shown to assist students in achieving independence from their families. SLCOs enable students to meet critical emotional needs in ways that faculty either do not or cannot provide. SLCOs give students the opportunity to learn and practice interacting with others who are different from themselves along essential dimensions. SLCOs also serve as a source of gratification for students who might be struggling

academically. SLCOs provide students with social training and social connections that can assist them in forming coherent career paths. Finally, SLCOs are significantly correlated with student persistence and graduation.<sup>3</sup>

Additional research has found positive correlations between involvement in “educationally purposeful activities, both inside and outside the classroom” and graduation rates.<sup>4</sup> This existing research, therefore, answered one of my research questions, namely, “What is the impact of involvement in SLCOs on student development and success?” The overall impact of student involvement in SLCOs on student development is positive<sup>i</sup>. Therefore, colleges and universities seeking ways to improve students’ experience, development, and success should be interested in this research.

Two lines of argument within student development theory and research strongly influenced my research, Vincent Tinto's research on how “academic and social integration” affects student persistence and graduation, and Alexander Astin’s research on student involvement and student development.<sup>5</sup> I will review Tinto's research to locate my research within the broader context of student development, engagement, and success. Tinto's research also helps me locate the significance of my intended contributions, both theoretically and practically. Astin’s research performs a similar function. It enables me to establish my research in the context of student involvement and engagement.

Tinto is widely regarded as one of the most influential scholars regarding college student development, retention, and graduation. Tinto argues that college students require both academic and social integration to achieve quality development and increase their likelihood of

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<sup>i</sup>. There is some research suggesting over-involvement may be detrimental to student health and development. While these findings are sound, they should not be used as evidence that general involvement in SLCOs is detrimental to the student (Koehler, 2014)



graduating. In fact, Tinto's research indicates that academic and social integration is the single most significant predictor of persistence in student retention and graduation.<sup>6</sup>

What is particularly interesting about Tinto's findings is that his discussion of "academic and social integration" appears to be exactly what institutions of higher education are trying to measure when they measure and track student engagement.<sup>7</sup> Also of note, however, is the fact that colleges and universities only exercise substantial influence and control over one of the two elements required for student persistence and graduation, namely, academics. Colleges and universities have far less control over the social half of Tinto's formula. Perhaps SLCOs can and do play an important role in social integration of college students, and perhaps also in the integration of the social and the academic aspects of their experience?

A great deal of research examines the role that academics play in increasing student academic involvement and integration. Among this research, two studies in bore a close relation to my research. The first was George Kuh's research on how student participation in university-led organizations and events impacts student engagement and student success. Kuh found that involvement in at least two university-led organizations and events positively impact student engagement and success. Kuh did not, however, examine the role that student involvement in student-led organizations and clubs or their events had on student engagement and success.

The absence of SLCOs in Kuh's research is significant because, in the balance of Tinto's "academic and social integration," university-led organizations and events fall on the academic side of the equation. University-led organizations and events are under the control of the university, not students. Furthermore, university-led organizations and events are limited to, and limited by, the resources and academic purposes of the educators and administrators who sponsor

and manage them. By their very nature, university-led organizations and events exist to achieve the university's goals and objectives.

One might wonder, therefore, if universities that rely upon university-led organizations and events to enhance 'student engagement' and student success are adequately addressing the social integration necessary for student engagement and success. In an ideal situation, the goals of the university and its students directly align. In reality, however, this is often probably not the case. Without direct student involvement in the selection, planning, and execution of university-led organizations and events, it is hard to imagine how students' goals and objectives could reliably be addressed. Indeed, the very existence of SLCOs testifies to the fact that students want organizations, events and experiences that the colleges and universities themselves do not provide. In order to understand the role that SLCOs play in students' academic and social integration we must study them directly. This study aims to fill that gap.

A second line of research, which comes a bit closer than Kuh's to my focus on SLCOs, examined student participation in professional organizations.<sup>8</sup> These researchers found that students value these activities because they involve professional development and contact with professionals. Students who participate in professional organizations presumably do so with the knowledge that they will be increasing their professional network by joining and participating in these organizations. Professional organizations, however, do not meet my definition of Student-Led Clubs and Organization because they have an established, externally existing platform for reaching and recruiting students that exist independent of the students or their college or university.

An additional line of research regarding the role that colleges play in preparing students for after-college success further underscores the importance of understanding the contributions that

SLCOs make to student development, engagement and success. The web-based research study of 30,000 college graduate adults, which is conducted by Purdue University in partnership with the Gallup Organization, identified six (6) experiences significantly correlated long-term life outcomes, like individual well-being and feeling engaged as an employee. Indeed, 82% of graduates who “Strongly Agreed” with the statement, “College prepared me well for life after college.” In comparison, just five percent (5%) graduates who reported none (0) of the Big Six experience strongly agreed with the same statement.<sup>9</sup>

The “Big Six” experiences are<sup>10</sup>:

1. I had at least one professor at College who made me excited about learning.
2. My professors at College cared about me as a person.
3. I had mentors who encouraged me to pursue my goals and dreams.
4. I work on a project that took a semester or more to complete.
5. I had an internship for job that allowed me to apply what I was learning in the classroom.
6. I was extremely active in extracurricular activities and organizations while I attended College.

This research addresses experience number six, which is the only statement the university cannot directly impact through a university-led organization or event. Furthermore, statement number six--“I was extremely active in extracurricular activities and organizations while I attended [College]”—also received the lowest percentage of “strongly agree” responses, just twenty percent (20%). Of significance for this study is the implication that these extracurricular activities and organizations are mainly the responsibility of SLCOs. However, we know very little about SLCOs.

The second line of argument within student development theory and research that deeply informed my research was Alexander Astin's conceptualization of student involvement. Astin develops his definition of student involvement by offering a behavior definition and then specifying four additional postulates. Astin defines student involvement as "the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience."<sup>11</sup> In an effort to promote theoretical and research clarity, Astin qualifies his definition of what counts as student involvement by noting that it only refers to observable student behaviors and does not refer to the student's thoughts or feelings.

Astin develops his conceptualization of student involvement with four additional postulates<sup>12</sup>:

1. "Regardless of the object, involvement occurs along a continuum."
2. "Involvement has both quantitative and qualitative features."
3. "The amount of student learning and personal development associated with any educational program is directly proportional to the quality and quantity of student involvement in that program."
4. "The effectiveness of any educational policy or practice is directly related to the capacity of that policy or practice to increase student involvement."

As stated in the second and third postulates, Astin conceptualizes student involvement as occurring along on a continuum of quantity and quality, not as a binary, "on or off" distinction. Thus, according to Astin, students are not simply 'involved' or 'uninvolved,' as much of the research literature describes, but more or less involved, by degree, in both the quantity and the quality of their involvement behaviors.

Putting the definition and four postulates together, Astin argues that student engagement falls at one end of the student involvement continuum, enabling him to make a distinction between student involvement and student engagement. On this continuum, a student with both high quantity and high quality involvement would be considered an engaged student. A student with low quantity and low quality involvement or who has never joined an SLCO, participated in an extracurricular activity, or attended a university-led event, would be a disengaged student.

The distinction that Astin makes between involvement and engagement came into play when I turned to analyze the results of my research. The difference is simple. A student could be involved in a high number of SLCO activities without being deeply engaged in those activities.<sup>13</sup> My research, however, led me to re-conceptualize Astin's continuum as a two-dimensional matrix. I will argue that a two-by-two matrix of quantity and quality behaviors does a better job of explaining my research findings than does Astin's continuum.

## Methods

To narrow the focus of my study of SLCOs, I revised the definition put forward by Janis Henderson, who defines a student organization as “a society or group, recognized by the university, with membership consisting of students at the university (undergraduate or [graduate]) with a common purpose and/or interest.”<sup>14</sup> While I found this definition useful, I also found it to be too broad for this study, so I revised Henderson's definition and added some distinctions that more adequately described the types of student groups that I observed. When I refer to a student-led club or organization or SLCO, I am specifically referring to a club or organization that primarily operates, meets or practices on the school's campus, and that is

registered as an organization through the school's OrgSync (or similar) system, which houses all data about the school's student-led clubs and organizations.

Within this definition, I discerned that four additional distinctions were necessary to differentiate the between the main types of SLCOs. First, there are organizations that fall into the Greek Life category, such as fraternities and sororities. These SLCOs are chapters or members of national organizations, to which their student members pay dues. The second category of SLCOs, which shares several similarities with the first, is professional organizations. These are SLCOs that focus on a specific area of professional practice or field of study such as Marketing, Human Resources, Biology Club, and Honors Societies. These SLCOs are also chapters of, or members of, larger national organizations, to which student members also pay dues. The third category of SLCOs consists of sports teams that have registered as club sports at a college or university. These SLCOs are organized and paid for, either entirely or partially, by the students participating in the club. The fourth category of SLCOs refers to student interest groups. These SLCOs consist of students organized some area or topic of interest, but who are not part of a national organization, a sports team, or a fraternity or sorority. Student interest groups provide a space for students to explore or bond over shared interests. This category includes groups such as religious and volunteering organizations, book and movie clubs, and student councils. These groups usually report to a faculty member or sponsor, but the involvement of that sponsor is not regulated or governed by the school or some external body.

The majority of experience the interviewed students had was with the second and fourth categories, professional organizations and student interest groups. While I did not set out to focus on just these two categories, I determined that these two sets of SLCOs best served my interest in

academic and social integration. These student experiences, and the potential for further research into their specific behaviors will be detailed in the final section of this work.

Given the qualitative and innovative interests in SLCOs, as reflected in my research questions, I drew my methods of subject recruitment, data collection, and analysis from voice-of-the-customer research methodologies that are often used by innovators. I conducted eight, in-person, semi-structured interviews with students who I categorized as falling into one of two groups, each group representing the extreme ends of Astin's student involvement continuum. I interviewed four (4) students who reported regularly participating in two or more SLCOs organizations at UTC's campus. Following the innovation research methodologies that focus on user-centered innovation, I labeled this group of subjects "Extreme Users" of SLCOs. I also interviewed four (4) students who reported not being a member of an SLCO on UTC's campus. I labeled this group of subjects "Extreme Non-Users" of SLCOs.

The student interviews were conducted on campus, in-person (face-to-face) using a semi-structured interview protocol. I developed the interview protocol by drawing on the service innovation interview questions developed by Lance Bettencourt to capture the core service and service delivery needs, as well as the desired outcomes, of service users.<sup>15</sup> Bettencourt's interview questions follow the Universal Job Map and user-centered methodology, an approach which he developed together with Anthony Ulwick.<sup>16</sup>

The purpose of the Universal Job Map is to "break down the task the customer wants done into a series of discrete process steps."<sup>17</sup> Using this framework, I developed interview questions designed to break down the tasks that my student subjects had to perform to become involved in SLCOs. By deconstructing the functional, social and emotional jobs that students have to perform, I aimed to gain a complete view of all the "touch-points" at which an SLCO

might improve its services to deliver more of the services and outcomes that students desire in "consuming" SLCO offerings. I asked my subjects questions aimed at eliciting the functional, social and emotional jobs they had to get perform and what outcomes they desired. By inquiring into each of my subject's responses, inviting them to "Tell me more about that..." whenever they described something that pertained to the jobs they were trying to get done in accessing and "consuming" SLCO offerings, I dug deeper, looking for insights into how SLCOs can better serve their student "customers."

To recruit volunteer subjects for this study, I conducted an anonymous online survey designed to identify students at the extreme ends of Astin's continuum of student involvement, that is, extreme users and extreme non-users of SLCOs. After identifying three students in both groups who consented to serve as interview subjects, I then used the "snowball" of increasing the number of research subjects. The snowball method involves asking interviewees, at the conclusion of their interview, if they would be willing to introduce me to a personal acquaintance who shares their extreme consuming or non-consuming behavior.

The snowball method of securing additional subjects proved to be very effective for this study. The "warm" referral to new potential subjects enabled me to establish trust with my subjects quite quickly. My warm referral interviewees appeared to feel more comfortable with me and the questions and divulged information regarding their perception of, and experience with, SLCOs that I might not have gotten had I approached them in a "cold call" manner.

I intentionally chose to interview my subjects in-person, rather than over the phone or online, because it enabled me to attend to non-verbal cues, such as facial expressions and body language, and to use that "data" to probe further when I noticed an unusual, unexpected, or incongruent response.<sup>18</sup>



## Results

The results of research are organized under the first two of my three research questions:

1. What are the perceptions of SLCOs from both extreme users and non-users?
2. What drives students to become involved in SLCOs?
3. What impact does involvement in SLCOs have on students' development and success?

The third research question was investigated by conducting a review of the secondary literature regarding SLCOs and student development, engagement and success. Since I have addressed those findings in the Literature Review section, I will not repeat them here. In this section, I will present the findings of my student interviews, starting with the interviewee's perception of SLCOs, followed by my findings regarding the drivers of involvement in SLCOs, and ending with evidence for a different perspective for viewing student involvement, based on Astin's involvement continuum mentioned previously in the Literature Review.

### Student Perceptions of SLCOs

The responses to the questions designed to elicit students' perspectives of SLCOs revealed interesting patterns. Responses to some of the questions fell along the lines of the students' levels of involvement, that is, as either Extreme Users or Extreme Non-Users of SLCO services. Responses to other questions did not. A use-patterned response was observed regarding the perception of what motivates student involvement in SLCOs. Extreme Non-Users were far

more likely than Extreme Users to perceive and comment on differences in the motivations of students who were involved in an SLCO. For example, when asked about the club to which the student had been a member, NU2 stated that "half the people were there because they wanted to be there, and the other half were for volunteer hours or their education classes. The people that wanted to be there were always really nice and engaging."<sup>19</sup> Three of the four Extreme Non-Users, as well as all four of the Extreme Users, expressed this sensitivity to differences in motivation, collectively saying that some students are involved in SLCOs because they are passionate about some aspect of it, and some are involved to simply put the experience on their resume or because they have to for class.

The perception that students have of what type of student best fits in SLCOs, however, did not fall along use patterns. Both Extreme Users and Extreme Non-Users believe that SLCOs are primarily designed for high achieving, passionate students, that were inherently different from themselves. Three Extreme Non-Users and one Extreme User exhibited this perception. This perception appears to create a barrier to entry for students looking to get involved in SLCOs. For example, an Extreme User, subject U2, reported feeling intimidated by clubs at first, especially those in the STEM field. This interviewee said of the club members, "they honestly thought they were all the prodigies." U2 reported feeling not qualified enough to join these club members.<sup>20</sup>

Along these lines, it was particularly interesting to note that NU4 said: "If you really enjoy something, there's definitely a club here for you."<sup>21</sup> What is interesting about this is their use of the word "you." NU4 understands that some people find value in clubs where people can explore their interests, but does not believe themselves to be passionate enough about anything to join an SLCO. They perceive these students as a group different from themselves. They go on to

describe the reasons why students join SLCOs, saying "for some people, it's just finding people with a common interest and then it's just something to do. If they're alone, just sitting there, they're like well okay I guess I could go do this and maybe meet someone."<sup>22</sup> Again, NU4 refers to SLCO members as "some people" and "they," impersonal and separate from themselves. This Non-User repeatedly used such language, referring to SLCO members as "they," "some people," and "someone who keeps emailing me."<sup>23</sup> This language reveals that these students think of SLCOs and their members as others, not a part of their community. However, once asked for their other thoughts on SLCOs, and for feedback on current clubs, NU1 began saying things like "how we can fix some of these issues" and "how can we get people interested."<sup>24</sup>

So why the switch from the perspective of seeing SLCOs as other, to being a stakeholder? They were simply asked to give their input, and this was enough to give them a sense of responsibility and belonging. NU1 even expressed regret for not participating more<sup>25</sup> and all four mentioned that some students can find value in SLCOs. NU3 also noted that in order for an SLCO to be better, there had to be more participation from students such as themselves, and the specific club they had the most interaction with would not be so bad if students became active in it again.<sup>26</sup> This awareness is good because it means that those non-users share the perception that SLCOs can have value to themselves, provided changes were made to solve their current problems with the social and intention drivers of involvement.

### **Drivers of Student Involvement in SLCOs**

While the drivers of student involvement are complex and vary on a case by case basis, my subjects reported some consistent patterns of behavior. These behaviors appear to positively or negatively affect students' intentions to participate in SLCOs. The first of these drivers come from the students' first introduction to the SLCO. Here the pattern was striking. Every extreme

user was able to trace the source, or driver, of their participation back to a person or group of people suggesting the SLCO to them. This "personal source driver" was true of every Extreme User, even in those cases in which the student's participation in the SLCO had been required as part of an academic course. The interpersonal role of the person who influenced Extreme Users varied. The person could be a friend<sup>27</sup>, family member<sup>28</sup>, or professor<sup>29</sup>. But in every case, the person who influenced the Extreme Users was someone the student trusted and respected. U4 was particularly struck by how passionate the person was that recruited them, stating that "you could just see them glow, pouring out the memories that they've had with their club."<sup>30</sup> U1 noted that she had friends from class who "made [the club] sound like so much fun," adding that "word of mouth is probably how I've joined most of my clubs."<sup>31</sup>

The extreme non-users also noted the importance of friends and mentors promoting SLCOs. NU3 reported that if they were to go to a meeting, they would feel it was necessary to convince their friends to go, otherwise they wouldn't attend it themselves.<sup>32</sup> NU3 also said that they currently did not see any incentive for joining "academic clubs" and would not consider joining "unless people really did start going that I knew, like friends, but no one really cares enough to make an effort."<sup>33</sup> This subject did add that "the only thing that makes me actually think about going is that I have this one professor that I really like, and she's super sweet...and I don't want to disappoint her."<sup>34</sup> That said, the student still did not attend.

These findings suggest that the primary driver for student involvement, and eventually student engagement, in SLCOs is a trusted and respected person who influences them. These influencers appear to have the most impact on student participation in SLCOs. They affect students' decisions to join by showing their passion for the SLCO, sharing what the SLCO does, serving as a kind of proof of concept<sup>35</sup> and communicating to students that the SLCO is "fun"

and “worth their time.”<sup>36</sup> These influencers are also important for facilitating a social space that provides a “[learning] atmosphere that professors and staff can’t provide,” which was an important value add noted by U4 about SLCOs.<sup>37</sup>

The second driver of student involvement in SLCOs concerns the social job-to-be-done that students face in participating. To access the positive social interactions that participating students reported experiencing, students must overcome the awkwardness that they both perceive and experience in joining a new social group with strangers. All my subjects reported dreading the uncomfortable social interactions that accompany being new to a group. The perceived awkwardness of showing up somewhere and not knowing anyone is a heavy deterrent for student involvement in SLCOs. Several of the non-users did not even stay at events long enough to get comfortable and meet new people.<sup>38</sup> Even those that did attend relied heavily on the presence or accompaniment of friends.<sup>39</sup>

Based on how the extreme users were all recruited to their SLCOs, I assume that having friends who are involved and meeting club members who relate to you are important elements in overcoming the fear of awkwardness. Interestingly, when I asked Extreme Non-Users to describe the behavior of club members they knew, three out of four reported positive descriptions and interactions. These positive descriptions caused me to think that SLCOs probably already contain members that could serve as influencers for these extreme non-using students. I note, however, that the non-users' positive descriptions of and positive interactions with SLCO members and events was not enough to gain or increase their involvement. It appears that if SLCO members want to retain the students that attend their events and use the social driver of student involvement to its fullest potential, they will need to leave an impression that goes beyond simply that “they were all pretty positive.”<sup>40</sup>

The third driver of student involvement is the intention behind SLCO events and meetings. A comparison of two stories related to me in the interviews, one by an Extreme User, the other by an Extreme Non-User, nicely frames the patterns I observed. An Extreme User reported attending an SLCO event at which only four students showed up to participate. The event was a resume workshop. Despite the low attendance, my subject reported that “[the club members] impacted those four people a lot...[the students] got a lot out of it.”<sup>41</sup> Note that this event had a specific intention, namely, to help students edit their resumes. When I inquired further, I discovered that it was targeted at the Honors College, a specific group of students who would find value in attending the event.

By comparison, an Extreme Non-User reported attending a series of five lunch events, each very well attended. Despite feeling particularly passionate about the topic of this interest group SLCO, this non-user subject reported feeling disheartened. Not only did the student not form any meaningful connections to the group’s members during those five events, but the student also learned that almost all of the students in attendance were only there for the free food. Most of the attending students admitted that they did not care about the group’s interest at all.<sup>42</sup> On paper, the events reported in this second story would be rated as more successful than the event related in the first story because of the higher attendance. In terms of impact on achieving student engagement, however, the event related in the first story appears to have been much more successful and impactful because it was more intentional and matched the intention of the attending students. Non-users also reported that the intention of the SLCO offerings was a significant driver of their intent to participate, and they used a variety of terms to describe this influence. NU3 said they would be interested in attending events if they were “academically relevant,” or were able to “provide an academic benefit,” or “have some [other] incentive.”<sup>43</sup>

Merely quantitative measures of student involvement in SLCOs appears to misrepresent what is actually happening inside SLCOs by failing to capture the qualitative aspects that drive deep engagement and impact.

The fourth driver of student involvement is the students' judgment of whether or not participation would be a good use of their time. This driver appears to be closely related to third and was often mentioned in the context of intention. The particular phrase "good use of time" was common with both extreme users, who all felt or hoped that attending SLCO events would be a "good use of time," as well as non-users, who feared it would not and so did not attend. The perception that the event or meeting is a "good use of time" can be affected by the intention behind the event or meeting.

The assessment of time usage, as reflected in the language used by the two different groups concerning time and their use of it, also appears to drive involvement in SLCOs. I observed that all of the extreme non-users used vague, imprecise language to describe what they would do if their current time stressors were removed. By contrast, I observed that extreme users tended to use specific language when asked how they would spend their time if their stressors were removed. Extreme users cited specific examples of what they would do, as well as what was currently stressing their time. It appears that the difference in clarity regarding time usage and time stressors points towards a difference in self-awareness and time management, either or both of which could be possible drivers of student involvement in SLCOs. While my interview questions did not directly ask students about how self-aware they are, it appears that Extreme Users are more aware of how they spend their time and are therefore more intentional with how they spend it, hence the repetition of going to SLCO events only if it is a "good use of time."

Students in both groups mentioned the fifth driver of student involvement, but more so by extreme non-users. This driver comes from professional connections and career assistance. Three out of four extreme non-users mentioned "resume building" as a reason students join SLCOs, specifically professional organizations and honors societies. Extreme users also reported that the professional connections made from being members of these organizations are a reason for students to join, adding that they recommended that students look into joining organizations that have a national presence because those organizations have more resources, experience, and structure to give to their chapters.<sup>44</sup> But extreme users were also more likely to cite real personal benefits, not just impersonal connections. For example, U2 described one interaction that resulted in them gaining a new mentor, who provided crucial feedback for their small business.<sup>45</sup>

To further clarify this fifth driver, when other extreme users were asked about the value of bringing in professional speakers, their initial response was almost identical: sometimes. They all noted that some speakers are great to bring in for professional organizations, or SLCOs in general, but only if they are chosen with true "intention" and are "bringing value" to the students, and this reflects the importance of having intention behind SLCO events for driving student involvement, as mentioned earlier.<sup>46</sup> U4 specifically cited the importance of outside speakers for "rounding off the edges of students," or helping students learn how to learn.<sup>47</sup> Those student directed events give value to U4 as a space to apply what they have learned in class in tangible ways, and to hear from experts in the field what their day-to-day responsibilities look like. This value is particularly emphasized by professional organizations, as they most often feed into a specific career path, but could also be applied to SLCOs beyond themselves, as a student interest group could host a good speaker, given enough intentionality behind their selection of speaker and choice of topic.



The sixth and final driver of student involvement is students' feelings of responsibility, belonging, and having a stake in SLCOs. This was mentioned earlier in NU1's switching from saying "they" to saying "we" when referencing SLCOs, and how this switch occurred after they were asked an open-ended question about the current state of SLCOs. Students who feel their voice is respected and meaningful for the success of the SLCO are much more likely to continue their involvement in it and take their participation more seriously. This was noted by U2, after they saw they were taking over too much responsibility for their club, and their team was getting less and less involved because there was nothing of importance for them to do. After noticing this, they started delegating more tasks to their team, increasing the time they could spend on other tasks as well as increasing the productivity and success of the club.<sup>48</sup>

#### **Four Quadrants of Student Involvement**

While I intentionally separated students into two extremes, within those extremes there are even further divisions and subgroups. For the non-users, there are students who exhibit similar motivations and level of interest as users, but for some specific combination of reasons, do not participate in SLCOs. Then for the extreme users, there are students that exhibit a non-user level of interest in subjects, but choose to participate because "they should."<sup>49</sup> The motivating factor of being in an SLCO for these students is to put their involvement on their resume so organizations later in their career know they were engaged while in college. The engagement provides little intrinsic value, as it primarily has the extrinsic value of looking better when applying for jobs after graduating. These behaviors played a critical role in informing my analysis of a need for a two-dimensional model for student involvement, which is discussed in the following section.

## Contributions to Theory and Practice

The first main finding of this study concern the conceptualization of student involvement, as that involvement relates to SLCOs. Currently, higher education practices use binary, quantitative measures of student involvement, for example, in attendance or numbers of attendees. According to this way of conceptualizing student involvement, students either are or are not involved. If they are involved, so the thinking goes, one can measure their involvement by counting the quantity of their involvement, that is, how often, how many times, or how much time they are involved in SLCOs. Somewhere along this continuum, the quantity of involvement gives rise to quality engagement.

The results of my research led me to question the accuracy of that conceptualization and replace it with a two-dimensional model of student involvement and engagement. If we place Quality of involvement on the vertical axis, ranging from low to high, and Quantity on the horizontal axis, also ranged from low to high, we can conceptualize student involvement in ways that make sense of the data I observed.

**Figure 1: The Two-by-Two Matrix of Student Involvement and Engagement**

<b>High Quality</b>		<b>Student Influencers</b>
<b>Low Quality</b>		
	<b>Low Quantity</b>	<b>High Quantity</b>

In the lower left, low-low condition, students experience both little quantity and quality in their SLCO. This was the condition reported by most of my extreme non-users. But in the

high-high condition, they experience both high quality and high quantity involvement. This was the condition reported by my extreme users about the influencers, those people who strongly impacted the decision of my extreme users to get involved in an SLCO in the first place. It also described one of the extreme users, as they were referred to by two other extreme users as an influencer for their decisions to participate in a particular SLCO.

The mixed conditions also described the condition of some of my interviewees. For example, the non-user who reported feeling disheartened by the lack of meaningful relationships within the SLCO they attended five times, along with their realization that the other students were only there for the free food, can clearly be located in the low quality, high quantity condition. Similarly, the extreme user who attended the sparsely populated by highly impactful resume writing workshop experienced the high quality, low quantity condition.

Once one conceives of student involvement along these two dimensions, a number of the theoretical questions and practical problems about SLCOs can be addressed. Theoretically, the relationship between student involvement and student engagement becomes clearer. Students experiencing the high quality, high quantity condition are clear candidates for both Astin's "engaged student" and for students who received the sixth, and lowest rated condition of the Purdue-Gallup Big Six experiences that correlate with student graduation and success, namely: "I was extremely active in extracurricular activities and organizations while I attended College."

A resource for solving the practical problem of recruiting and retaining students in SLCOs becomes more evident once the vital role played by SLCO members in the high quality and high quantity condition is appreciated. These "influencers" played a significant role in terms of recruiting and retaining extreme users. Student leaders of SLCOs need to know what a pivotal role and resource these "influencer" members do and should play. Based on my findings, the best

way to contribute to the seriousness of involvement, and to have more engaged students, is for SLCOs to gather input from and build relationships with the influencers in the community. These are the well-connected students or professors, who likely are already connected to one SLCO or community on campus, and are well respected, trusted, and looked up to by their students or peers.

The third main finding of this study concerns the critical role of intention in retaining and engaging students. Based on my research, student leaders of SLCOs need to articulate and execute the intention behind the events and meetings it hosts. Getting good numbers of students to an event with free pizza is great for promotion, but should not be a weekly occurrence that replaces other events more specific to the SLCOs areas of interest or expertise. Such strategies leave those students who are interested in higher level involvement unfulfilled and dissatisfied with their experience. If SLCO leaders host events that students like NU3 find relevant, they would be much more likely to attend. To make their events relevant for those students, they have to approach the planning process with more intention, identifying students' true areas of interest that will convince them that attending will be a "good use of time."<sup>50</sup>

The fourth main finding relates to the previous, in that peer-to-peer connection appears to be the best way to retain students in SLCOs, and should be an area of interest for SLCOs looking to increase student involvement in their club. Once a student has overcome that initial fear of doing something different, it is imperative that SLCO members make a quality connection to them, so that they do not have such a high barrier of perceived awkwardness for the next SLCO meeting or event, leading to higher retention rates. The aim is to get the student to a point where they understand the mission of the SLCO, and truly see the value and incentive for joining. As U4 put it, "you can accept something as true but that doesn't mean you quite understand [or

accept] it, or even believe the mission is true, until you have to experience [the SLCOs] benefits and you say ‘wow I had no idea that I was missing so much.’”<sup>51</sup> Three of the four extreme non-users perceived SLCOs as positive, so they “accept” the thought that joining would be beneficial as “true,” but they would not cross the line into commitment until they “experience [the SLCOs] benefits” and have a positive interaction with the SLCO. Since having friends at meetings was the most commonly cited reason extreme non-users would become involved in SLCOs, it makes sense to assume that having positive peer-to-peer interactions, that could eventually lead to friendships, is the best way retain students in SLCOs.

The fifth and final finding of my research suggests that currently, some clubs fill their numbers because professors require participation, and this achieves the basic level of involvement and opens students up to the possibility of becoming more involved. However, with too much weight placed on quantity over quality of interactions, this required participation can do more harm than good for a club, driving away passionate students who could have become influencers for the SLCO. These students should be of primary importance to SLCOs, for the reasons discussed at the beginning of this section. By encouraging quantity of involvement, these would-be influencers learn to not trust the SLCO, because they perceive that it does not have their interests at heart and is not trying to accomplish the mission they believe it should. This was most apparent in NU2’s experience with the free lunches. They were very upset by the behavior of the SLCO, and it showed in their tone and in their passion for the area of interest the SLCO was supposed to have.

## Areas and Questions for Further Study

The first area for further research stems from a common misconception held by educators and students about student engagement. By commonly accepted ways of thinking, a student who is an extreme user of SLCOs has significantly more academic success and is far more organized than a student who is an extreme non-user. However, I've found that these two groups are more similar than most assume. Both groups reported high GPA's, and no group was significantly more organized than the other. One extreme non-user had a very precise and thorough record of his daily activities, while one extreme user relied mostly on memory and the occasional use of the reminder app on their phone. That being said, there are some differences between the groups, especially concerning self-awareness of their behaviors. Extreme-users were more likely to be aware of how they'd spend their free time if their current stresses were removed, compared to extreme non-users who tended to be less confident and clear with how they would spend their free time. This distinction warrants further research, possibly into the similarities and differences between how extreme users and extreme non-users think about time, the ways they spend it, and their level of control over their own schedule, because it appears to be more complex than thinking more involved students are inherently more organized and successful in their undergraduate careers than non-involved students.

The second area for additional research comes from an insight noted, but not proven, as the possibility that extreme users are who they are because of prior experience with being in uncomfortable or stressful situations, and gaining a positive outcome from it. Whereas extreme non-users might not have had the opportunity to develop this skillset, so when they got to college they were not prepared with the tools needed to make the leap from being unengaged to engaged. This is an assumption based on behaviors I noted during the interviews, and warrants further

research to see if there are some key events that help develop a student's aptitude or likeliness for higher engagement in SLCOs prior to entering higher education.

A third area for further research concerns the other categories of SLCOs that were not represented in this study. The majority of experience the interviewed students had was with the second and fourth categories detailed in the methods section of this research. These two groups were professional organizations and student interest groups. This was not done intentionally, and due to the small-scale nature of the study it was not expanded to include students from categories one and three, Greek Life and Sports Clubs. These SLCOs possess qualities very different from the other two categories that I believe would make them valuable for further research into their specific behaviors, possibly gaining insight into student behavior by comparing those results with the results of this study.

A final question for further research is, does required involvement lead to better long-term success and retention for SLCOs? Based on the fact that none of the extreme users interviewed stayed with their SLCOs because of a requirement, and the extreme non-users who were required to attend did not stick with the SLCO, I would say that required involvement does not strongly suggest success for the SLCO. However, further research is needed to confirm this assumption, as this sample size is too small to make such a generalization.

### **Limitations of This Research**

The limitations of my research primarily concern the small sample size. I intentionally chose to follow a well-established innovation method of beginning my discovery by focusing on extreme users and non-users. The focus on extreme users and non-users enables the innovator to discover the contrast between the functional, social, and emotional jobs-to-be-done that lead to

adopting behavior and those that lead to non-adopting behavior. The insights generated by this comparison can be used by the innovator to generate hypotheses and to design and run small experiments designed to test those hypotheses. A next step in confirming, disconfirming and revising the findings of this study would require expanding the small sample of four (4) extreme users and four (4) extreme non-users would need to an additional six (6) in each category. This would render a sample size of ten extreme users and ten extreme non-users. The larger sample size of twenty, with ten in each of the extreme conditions, should, theoretically, yield approximately ninety percent (90%) of the users needs.<sup>52</sup> Then, after confirming disconfirming and revising the findings and insights produced by this small sample study, an additional set of interviews with ten (10) non-extreme users would need to be conducted and analyzed. Based on prior research, this should enable the innovator to identify ninety-five percent (95%) of the users needs.

A second limitation of this study is the lack of expert interviews. I believe that by conducting expert interviews with professionals in student development, such as Career Counselors, Student Advisors, Professors, and Guidance Counselors, many more insights could be generated.

A third limitation of this research concerns the construction and implementation of the interview guide. While my research methods have solid backing in the Universal Job Map, the specific questions need to be revised to reflect the particular nature of SLCO services. With further time and resources, it would be beneficial to set up full interviews with students and go through the entire job mapping process described in the Universal Job Map. However, in the interest of time and to perform a cursory test of what problems exist in the relationship between SLCOs and students, the questions were less in depth than what the Universal Job Map calls for.



Additionally, I found that while asking the exact same question to each student was helpful for getting a baseline, it also limited my ability to pick up on insights and ask more specific questions of each student.

A fourth limitation of this research concerns my analysis of the results. Most of my data and my conclusions are inter-subjective. I did not conduct quantitative, so no statistically significant conclusions can be formed.

Finally, this research would be stronger with a more diverse group of students to interview. Due to the “snowball” method of having students introduce me to a friend who shared their usage behavior, many of the students knew each other and were part of the same communities on campus, such as the Honors College and the Entrepreneurship Club. If this study was done again, I would cast a wider net with an anonymous survey to the campus, then interview a more diverse group.

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<sup>1</sup> Knefelkamp, Widick, & Parker, 1978 as cited by Student Development in College: Theory, Research, and Practice, 2010

<sup>2</sup> Evans, N. J., Forney, D. S., Guido, F. M., Patton, L. D., & Renn, K. A. (2010). Student Development in College: Theory, Research, and Practice (2nd ed., pp. 1-31): Jossey-Bass.

<sup>3</sup> Kenneth Feldman and Theodore Newcomb, 1969 as cited by Student Development in College: Theory, Research, and Practice, 2010

<sup>4</sup> Astin, 1975, 1993; Bean, 1990, 2005; Berger & Milem, 1999, Braxton, Milem, & Sullivan, 2000; Bridges, Cambridge, Kuh, & Leegwater, 2005; Milem & Berger, 1997; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Peltier, Laden, & Matranga, 1999; Stage & Hossler, 2000; Tinto, 1993, 2000, 2005 as cited by Student Engagement in Higher Education: Theoretical Perspectives and Practical Approaches for Diverse Populations, 2009 as cited by Student Engagement in Higher Education 2009

<sup>5</sup> Tinto, Vincent. (2000). Taking retention seriously: Rethinking the first year of college (Vol. 19, pp. 5-10): NACADA Journal.

<sup>6</sup> Tinto, Vincent. (2000). Taking retention seriously: Rethinking the first year of college (Vol. 19, pp. 5-10): NACADA Journal.

<sup>7</sup> Harper, S. R., & Quaye, S. J. (2009). Student Engagement in Higher Education: Theoretical Perspectives and Practical Approaches for Diverse Populations (pp. 1-12): Taylor & Francis Group.

<sup>8</sup> Munoz, L., Miller, R., & Poole, S. M. (2016). Professional student organizations and experiential learning activities: What drives student intentions to participate? Journal of Education for Business, 91(1), 45-51.

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<sup>9</sup> Seymour, Sean, & Lopez, S. (2015). 'Big Six' College Experiences Linked to Life Preparedness: Gallup.com.

<sup>10</sup> Gallup-Purdue Index. (2014). Great Jobs. Great Lives. The 2014 Gallup-Purdue Index Report (pp. 1-26). Washington, DC: Gallup, Inc.

<sup>11</sup> Astin, A. (1984). Student involvement: A developmental theory for higher education (Vol. 25, pp. 297): Journal of College Student Personnel.

<sup>12</sup> Astin, A. (1984). Student involvement: A developmental theory for higher education (Vol. 25, pp. 298): Journal of College Student Personnel.

<sup>13</sup> Harper, S. R., & Quaye, S. J. (2009). Student Engagement in Higher Education: Theoretical Perspectives and Practical Approaches for Diverse Populations (pp. 1-12): Taylor & Francis Group.

<sup>14</sup> Henderson, J. (2017). Student Organization Participation Benefits Inventory: Anticipated and Experienced. Texas Tech University.

<sup>15</sup> Bettencourt, L., & Brown, S. W. (2013). From goods to great: Service innovation in a product-dominant firm (Vol. 56, pp. 277-283): Business Horizons.

<sup>16</sup> Bettencourt, L., & Ulwick, A. (2008). The Customer-Centered Innovation Map: Harvard Business Review.

<sup>17</sup> Bettencourt, L., & Ulwick, A. (2008). The Customer-Centered Innovation Map: Harvard Business Review.

<sup>18</sup> My base questions were drawn from the research of Munoz, L., Miller, R., & Poole, S. M. (2016), Koehler, J. (2014), and Henderson, J. (2017).

<sup>19</sup> (NU2.1.2a)

<sup>20</sup> (U2.1.1a)

<sup>21</sup> (NU4.3.1)

<sup>22</sup> (NU4.3.2)

<sup>23</sup> (NU1.1.3a)

<sup>24</sup> (NU1.3.6)

<sup>25</sup> (NU1.3.6)

<sup>26</sup> (NU3.3.3a)

<sup>27</sup> (U1.1.3a)

<sup>28</sup> (U4.1.3a)

<sup>29</sup> (U2.2.1)

<sup>30</sup> (U4.1.3a)

<sup>31</sup> (U1.1.3a)

<sup>32</sup> (NU3.3.1b)

<sup>33</sup> (NU3.3.1)

<sup>34</sup> (NU.3.3.1b)

<sup>35</sup> (U4.1.3)

<sup>36</sup> (U4.1.3a)

<sup>37</sup> (U4.2.3a)

<sup>38</sup> (NU4.3.6)

<sup>39</sup> (U3.1.3)

<sup>40</sup> (NU1.1.2a)

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<sup>41</sup> (U3.1.2)

<sup>42</sup> (NU2.3.1a)

<sup>43</sup> (NU3.3.1b)

<sup>44</sup> (U2.2.6)

<sup>45</sup> (U2.2.3)

<sup>46</sup> (U4.2.3a)

<sup>47</sup> (U4.2.6)

<sup>48</sup> (U2.2.2)

<sup>49</sup> (U3.2.1a)

<sup>50</sup> (U1.1.2)

<sup>51</sup> (U4.1.3b)

<sup>51</sup> Griffin, A., & Hauser, J. R. (1993). The Voice of the Customer (Vol. 12 (Winter), pp. 1-27): Marketing Science.

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