

Longitudinal Study of Student Involvement: Reasons for Involvement – Year One

Overview

The Longitudinal Study of Student Involvement is a constructivist narrative study designed to understand the influence of co-curricular involvement, defined as *activities occurring outside of the classroom*, on students' growth and development for students at the University of Maryland. This brief outlines findings during the first year of the study. During their first year, 19 students completed interview 1 and 15 students completed interview 2; both interviews are included in this report. More information about the methods and methodology associated with the study can be found at the end of the report.

The purpose of this brief is to summarize students' reflections on the various reasons why students became involved with the co-curricular events and programs of their choosing at University of Maryland, College Park. The following reasons for involvement emerged from the study: 1) family or personal connection, 2) connections to academic majors or interests, 3) making friends, and 4) racial and ethnic identity based reasons. Four students either did not provide reasons as to why they joined the organizations and activities that they joined in their first year or they did not pursue any co-curricular activities their first year.

Demographics

Reasons for Involvement

Student (pseudonym)	Race/ Ethnicity	Gender	In v. out of state	Personal Connections	Academic Interests	Make friends	Identity
AJ	White	M	In	X			
Chase	Asian	M	Out				
Damla	Asian	F	Out	X			
Elizabeth	White	F	Out				
Emily	White	F	In	X	X		
Esther	White	F	In	X	X	X	
Eva	White	F	In		X		
Grace	Jewish	F	Out		X		
Hana	Asian	F	In	X	X	X	
Jillian	Black	F	In	X	X		X
Kamala	Black	F	In	X		X	X
Kira	Asian	F	Out				
Leia	White	F	In	X	X	X	
Molly	White	F	Out	X			
Michelle	White	F	In	X			
Nuha	Middle Eastern	F	In	X			
Owen	Asian	M	In				
Robin	White	F	In	X	X		
Virginia	White	F	In	X			

Findings

The participants in this study shared four major reasons they chose to become involved in various co-curricular programs and activities in their first year of college: 1) family or personal connections, 2) connections to academic majors or interests, 3) making friends, 4) racial/ethnic identity based.

Personal Connections

In reviewing the first-year conversations with the participants, over half (13) participants stated their reason for involvement was connected to prior personal connections and/or they chose to become involved in organizations that were similar to those they had enjoyed participating in as high school students.

Personal Connections: Family and Prior Relationships

One participant, AJ, shared involvement was shaped by his experiencing battling cancer at a young age. This connection and sense of commitment led to AJ becoming involved with TerpThon during his freshman year. AJ started with explaining his connection to cancer and why he is committed to organizations with a focus on aiding cancer research or helping those with cancer:

"My family has raised money ... for 10 years now... I was diagnosed 2 weeks before I turned 5. I had 38 months of chemotherapy... I have my yearly shots at [the hospital TerpThon supports] ..."

Leia and Michelle both attributed their reason for becoming involved with campus partially to their parents. Leia's parents played a role with her getting involved by encouraging her try out many new opportunities on campus. Michelle's mom is a teacher, who previously taught someone who graduated from the University of Maryland with the same major as her. Michelle described that this connection made through her mom, led to this older alumna serving as a mentor role who advised Michelle on cocurricular opportunities she should consider.

"She is like you have to do this and you have to do that ...so it is kinda like good to know what is around campus and she definitely influenced me she was always like do this, this is the way I got involved... [She] checks ups on me and she is like are you involved in clubs yet and I'm like no, and she says you need to join clubs and get involved and go to this... It's good to have her because she has been here and her experience and graduated and like made it."

Family connections regarding students' reasons to becoming involved in certain cocurricular experiences extended past the parents and included the encouragement from siblings. Hana's family connection comes from her brother. She joined ROTC in part because her older brother enjoyed West Point and a summer military program in which he participated and that prompted her own interest in military programs. Another participant, Nuha, explained her sister was a major reason that she became involved with Muslim Student Association (MSA). Nuha stated her sister was once a part of the organization. She supported her sister by coming to their campus events since she was in high school, and shared that joining MSA was just "the natural thing to do."

Personal Connections: Similar High School Involvement

Joining an organization because of being connected to a similar organization in high school or in their hometown, was a subtheme identified within the participants.

Three participants, Molly, Robin, and Esther, became involved on campus due to being a part of similar organizations when they were in high school. Robin joined TerpThon because it is similar to an organization she was involved in during high school. Robin explained her high school involvement by sharing:

"the lady in charge of it she ...explained what it was [and] we had a student that actually passed away due to a brain tumor so that like really inspired me and one of my best friends sister was really involved in it and that just really inspired me too."

Eventually Robin became a member of the leadership team and reflected that "the dance marathon has been like a huge part of my life so that actually inspired me to join TerpThon here." Molly stated that throughout her involvement in high school, these spaces provided an opportunity to connect and become close with friends.

Like Molly and Robin, Esther joined an on-campus organization that reminded her of her hometown and previous experience being involved in organizations. Esther discussed how the founder of the organization went to high school "10 minutes from my house, so I think that's why it's such a big deal in my town." Hana expressed a desire to have her college experience not center on her ROTC involvement, and expressed interest in joining acapella and student government organizations, both of which she had participated in high school.

Damla noted that she had been involved in an organization similar to student Entertainment and Events (SEE) in high school. Knowing how fun her high school experience had been, prompted her to become involved in SEE when she came to UMD. Other participants noted a prior history with athletics or fitness related activities that prompted them to join intramural or club sports teams that also served as a wellness and stress relief activity.

Connection to Academic Interests

Eight participants expressed that even in their first year of college, they were choosing co-curricular activities to participate in based on their academic or career interests and what they might be able to gain from these experiences.

Esther shared that another reason she was excited to become involved in the organization associated with her hometown was its connection to her psychology major, noting that her involvement would align well with the academic content of her major:

"... it's just an organization to try and make people more aware of violent relationships, so... they're focusing on fraternities and sororities and making workshops with them where they watch a video and have a discussion about it. I would be one the facilitators who would ask questions and just like keep the conversation going."

Grace shared she chose student organizations that compliment her major while also fulfilling a course requirement:

"I joined the yearbook committee so I'm like writing the academic section for that so um and then that is going to serve for my... I have to do a media participation project, in my journalism class like with an organization on campus so it's really nice that I could do that one because it's like really flexible."

Robin shared a similar reasoning, stating that her interest for becoming involved within the UMD community was connected to the fact she wanted to be a pediatric Physicians Assistant. Her interest

in health led her to student organizations such as Public Health Without Borders, a group whose focus is on addressing health disparities across global communities. Robin also became involved in other health related clubs/organizations in her first year. Jillian also has a connection to public health, stating that her passions guide her to what she is involved in, such as Public Health without Borders and Terps Against Hunger.

Like Robin and Jillian, Hana considered her future career goals when choosing to participate in ROTC. Although her brother's participation in military programs and later attendance at West Point piqued her interest in ROTC, it was her consideration of careers after college that influenced her decision of which branch of ROTC to join.

Eva's reason for becoming involved on campus centered on faculty's integration of co-curricular experiences as a compliment to academic experiences. Eva indicated her outside of the classroom pursuits she learned about largely from her classes:

"I think last semester, what really influenced me to join all the things I did, was when students or professors would come into my class and talk about the organization. ...we had to do a project, and so all the professors would come in and talk about what the projects were and [this one professor] runs the Balloon program. So, when she talked about it, I thought it was really interesting how you actually got to launch your payload at the end of the semester, and she just seemed like a really cool professor to work with. So, that's why I chose Balloon."

Eva became connected with almost all of her co-curricular involvement through her academic courses. In fact, she shared that while she did attend the First Look Fair, she "didn't join anything I found at that, mainly because I'd already joined other things prior to that... Most of the clubs I joined, I just found out about through announcements during class."

Getting to Know People and Making Friends

For first year students, making friends proved to be an important factor in students becoming involved on campus. Four students, Hana, Kamala, Esther, and Leia shared how making friends and getting to know people were determining factors in them becoming involved on campus.

Leia shared that she joined her living learning community not only because she liked research, but because she thought it would be a good way to meet people on campus. Similarly, Hana joined intramural soccer on an ROTC team because she "thought if I did an intermural sport with other cadets it might help me know them better." Hana described how it can be difficult making friends as a freshman but getting involved could help. She further explained:

"The upperclassmen are very intimidating at first so like, I feel like if I just on Friday nights for an hour or two just like, play soccer with them it might be a little bit better. Just like, feel more like I can fit in as a freshman."

For Kamala, her faith served as a connecting point for how she could meet others on campus. Kamala said she tries to go to different events on campus "to meet new people, network, and see what's going on." She stated she wanted to join a church group or bible study, and that she ended up going to a meeting when one of her friends invited her and she ended up "getting hooked in a sense."

Although not exclusive to the other themes, making friends emerged as a standalone theme as for these students, the need to identify and find their community on campus seemed to take a higher priority than aligning their involvement with academic interests or another outcome.

Racial and Ethnic Identity

For both Kamala and Jillian, their racial identity was significant in their decisions about which opportunities to pursue their freshman year on campus. Jillian explained why she joined organizations that affirmed her racial and ethnic identity, stating that she loved being black and Caribbean. For Jillian, it was important for her to join groups that aligned with aspects of her identities and having a level of familiarity with the organization through orientation helped her as well. She shared she joined BSU because the group presented during orientation and her and a friend added themselves to the group chat, which enable them to find out more about events because of this early connection.

Kamala stated that one of the reasons she stayed involved in one of her organizations was because of community built around shared racial and ethnic identities. Kamala explained she:

"felt like they were open and I could relate to them, because it's like really like majority like African and I'm Nigerian, and there's like people from Liberia and all these people that I can kind of relate to so I felt like I fit in there."

Racial and ethnic identity reasons for joining organizations may be a subset of the Making Friends theme, but for the students who mentioned this as a reason for involvement during their first year, this involvement was about more than just the ability to make friends and belong; it was also about celebrating their identities.

Conclusion

None of the themes and reasons presented here are exclusive of one another. For example, Robin explained her interest in some of the organizations she chose to be involved in her first year through their connection to both her academic interests and similar organizations she was involved in in high school. Similarly, identity related reasons for joining organizations aligns strongly with wanting to make friends and meet new people with a shared background.

Jillian shared that "when you're not familiar with things, you brush it off." For all the organizations and opportunities students were involved in their freshman year, every student seemed to have a connection, either through family members, prior involvement, a passion area or academic interest, and/or identity connection to the organization. No student sought out an opportunity to join an organization with a focus or mission that was completely new to them, suggesting a baseline level of comfort and awareness is important when entering a new environment. As STAMP and other departments consider ways in which they might market their opportunities, finding ways to develop this comfort appears to be an important consideration for students.

Almost all students expressed a focus on how the organization or opportunity would serve them, either through general wellness and stress relief, contributing to their academic and career preparation, facilitating a sense of belonging, or serving as a starting point to making friends and building relationships. These findings suggest that the Division of Student Affairs' plan to develop learning goals for students will be well received as almost half of the students in this report are

choosing their involvement based in part on experiential learning outcomes that, if formalized at the divisional level, may well serve to better communicate the value of the different experiences available.

These findings summarize only the first year of students' involvement on campus. Future reports will explore how involvement in co-curricular organizations change over time and how these reasons may or may not continue to influence involvement or what new reasons may develop for students as they continue their college career. In the coming years, underlying reasons *may* prove to be an orienting guidepost even as the specific organizations and types of involvement change as students develop.

Methods

The Longitudinal Study of Student Involvement is a constructivist narrative study designed to understand the influence of co-curricular involvement, defined as *activities occurring outside of the classroom*, on students' growth and development for students at the University of Maryland. This study will explore all types of co-curricular involvement in which students are engaged, examining the reason for and results of their engagement. The research team also explores barriers to student involvement and other ways in which students spend their time out of the classroom.

This study will explore the experiences and events that have influenced students' decisions to become involved on campus. Critical events are those experiences in an individual's life that affect a change in worldview or understanding (Webster & Meratova, 2007). In exploring current experiences and prior expectations, this study attempts to advance an understanding of the decision to become involved in post-secondary co-curricular programming. In focusing on prior experiences, this study sought to explore the collection and connections between a set of influential experiences rather than simply focusing on discrete events in the participants' lives separate from the rest of the individuals lived experience. The study centers on the content of participants' stories, including the other individuals who are involved and the sequence of events (Chase, 2005). The similarities in participants' stories is highlighted using the content-categorical method of analysis (Leiblich, Tuval-Machiach, & Zilber, 1998).

This study began in fall 2017. Members of the research team visited first-year student courses (e.g., UNIV100, GEMS100) to recruit students to participate. Students who were interested were asked to complete an online interest form (n= 30) which collected basic demographics and information regarding high school involvement. A member of the research team reached out to all participants who completed the interest survey to schedule the initial interview. Each year, two semi-structured interviews are scheduled, typically in October and April, and between 30 to 60 minutes per student. Participants will be engaged in this study over the course of their undergraduate career at the university, providing a unique opportunity to understand students' involvement choices, influences, and outcomes over time. All interviews are recorded and transcribed verbatim. Two members of the research team code each interview using NVivo software and the members of the Research Team meet weekly to discuss codes, themes, challenges, and next steps with the project.