

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Heather Nicole Christian Saladino for the degree of Master of Science in College Student Services Administration presented on April 20, 2010.

Title: Student Activists in Special Interest Student Organizations: Experiences and Benefits

Abstract approved:

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For more than a decade research on student involvement has informed practitioners in their understanding of the development that results from students' involvement inside and outside the classroom. Since 2006, researchers have explored the socially responsible leadership practices as well as the rise in the popularity of community grassroots organizations; this research has provided a space for a study of the experiences of student activists in change-oriented organizations. Dunkel and Schuh (1998) coined the term *Special Interest Organizations* to represent this unique category within the great diversity of student organizations on campuses today. As various groups have emerged to meet the needs of college and university students, this study was undertaken to investigate the experience of students in special interest organizations; organizations specifically centered on creating change. Five self-identified student activists who belong to this type of student organization at a major public university participated in a qualitative, constructivist study of their experiences which sought to discover the motivations, outcomes and benefits of their involvement. Fifteen themes emerged to explain their experiences, and the benefits of their experiences, in special interest organizations.

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Student Activists in Special Interest Student Organizations:
Experiences and Benefits

by
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A THESIS

submitted to

Oregon State University

in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the
degree of

Master of Science

Presented April 20, 2010
Commencement June 2010

Master of Science thesis of Heather Nicole Christian Saladino presented on April 20, 2010.

APPROVED:

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I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

Heather Nicole Christian Saladino, Author

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would first like to acknowledge the participants who inspired me so much during this process. Their voices allowed me to understand another element of the student involvement experience and gave me a new sense of purpose in what I do.

The most important person who helped me to get through this process and through this program have been my amazing husband and partner Joe who supported me through attempting to balance all of the changes in our lives, new state, new school and our wedding. He comforted me through all of the blood sweat and tears of this experience. Thank you!

I would like to thank and acknowledge the support of the CSSA faculty especially Melissa Yamamoto who served as a mentor, sounding board and support through whatever the experience of research and graduate school threw at me.

Thank you Christian, for helping me find my voice, you gave me an incredible gift.

To AJ who helped me to find myself again and helped me find the confidence to succeed.

To my major professor Tom Scheuermann who never stopped believing that I could do this and was always supportive. I enjoyed our tangential talks in your office and your limitless encouragement.

To my committee Don Johnson, Carol Caughey and Mamta Accapadi for your time, care and interest in helping me to succeed through this process.

To my Women's Center family who gave me the most challenge and support that I have ever felt. I love you dearly.

To my cohort, who gave me a reason to keep going when things were tough shared a microphone or a meal with me in our “ritual” celebration of completed terms. You have been my second family through this process and I hope that I still see you at ACPA when we are 70. I would like to acknowledge all of you by name because you have all taught me such wonderful things about life, student affairs and family.

To the CSSA-SA/Thesis Team who was irreplaceable and important peers and mentors to me, you were always great cheerleaders and realists and I love you for it. I can't wait to see what you will all do, you are amazing professionals and friends.

To my thesis buddy, Karen whether we were in the library until 1am, watching the Olympics and (working) or sharing Tea and Tots at McMenamins working on our Thesis until it closed, we always had fun (until 12:30). You are amazing.

To my family and new family who supported me even when I didn't have time to call. I love you.

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Student Activists in Special Interest Student Organizations: Experiences and Benefits

Personal Statement

Student involvement has been a particularly significant interest to me throughout my years as a student, as a professional staff member, and now as a graduate student. I began my journey into student affairs through my involvement in residence hall leadership. Through involvement I gained skills that would benefit me personally and professionally. Through reflection and study of student development, it became clear that these growth opportunities were central in the path to my career as well as my values.

Through my involvement in student organizations I gained lasting friendships, a social and professional network, confidence in my ability to create something of great meaning to myself and others, and gained a passion for service to others. This is my experience; but a significant experience that informs my passion for intellectual inquiry, research, and application. This is the first of many studies I hope to conduct in my life's work that will contribute to the understanding of students and inform practice in the area of student growth and development

Chapter I: Introduction

Research Opportunity

Research on has shown that student involvement experiences of all types can be growth experiences for students. Dunkel and Schuh (1998) explain that “the primary organizational reward is in providing students with an opportunity to participate in an enjoyable activity or to achieve a valuable purpose” (p.12). If a student finds an organization in which they find solace, around those who share a common interest, it can

be rewarding. Through positive experiences with extracurricular involvement with student organizations, students can feel a sense that they matter. In the field of student affairs, conducting research that may provide methods on how to better serve students is a motivating factor. My investigation of this particular genre and subgenres of student organizations stems from knowledge of the increased number of special interest organizations and the increased level of civic consciousness in society right now. I hope to see where these areas intersect, and furthermore, engage in new approach to research pertaining to these student groups.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to conduct a qualitative study of student's lived experiences in special interest organizations centered on making change. This study is an opportunity to provide additional information on the impact of extracurricular student involvement. Student involvement as defined by Astin (1999) the quantity and quality of the physical and psychological energy that students invest in the college experience (p.528). According to Astin (1999), many types of involvement can positively affect students including academic and extracurricular involvement. For this study the researcher will focus on extracurricular student involvement. The current research identified in the Literature Review explains that different types of student involvement such as residential living, conducting research with a professor, honors programs, ROTC, student employment and intercollegiate sports have influences on students. However, there is little research that explains the experiences and benefits from involvement in a particular genre of special interest student organization. A special interest organization is a unique

category of student groups and organizations that focus on a specific interest that can be on a variety of different topics. Special interest student organizations include the greatest diversity in student organizations (Dunkel and Schuh, 1998) and therefore warrant further investigation.

In addition, research points to a need to support these special interest organizations. For example, Shaun Harper (2008) discusses the need for higher education professionals to support social progress on college campuses. The study is centered on discovering the voice of students who work toward social progress through campus activism. Capturing the voice of the students allows for University practitioners and faculty to hear what they have to say and find ways to support them.

Supporting students and encouraging them to speak up is not only important for the climate of the university, but for student development, and furthermore may help growth of society. Administrators have to balance their roles as representatives of the University; however, there is more that could be done to create an infrastructure of support that would teach students to sustain their organizations and the purpose of the organizations. I feel this is particularly salient for students who seek to benefit society and set an example of how things could be. Harper (2008) further explains, “Listening to and learning from students enables them to develop their voices and recognize their roles in contributing to inclusive campuses that are welcoming of diverse learners” (p. 43).

The goal of my research is to listen to the experiences of students, identify patterns of their experiences and present emergent themes that can guide professionals through their work with special interest based organizations, specifically work with student activists that are engaged in making change. Student Affairs practitioners

including student organization advisors and leadership specialists can gain an understanding of the needs of these students, and have the ability to theorize and create practices that can successfully contribute to the challenge and support of those who choose these organizations over others.

Research Question

This study explores a specific genre of student organization that focuses on student's interests. Special interest organizations are organizations in which students are brought together with like interests, and can range from a Chess Club to LGBT organizations. For the purpose of this study, however, the category will focus on one area, special interest organizations which focus on political and social change and engage in activism. The choice to concentrate on organizations which focus on political and social change comes from the need to further break down the genre so that it may be feasible to study it in a short period of time. Furthermore, looking at student activist's experiences on campus is salient to today's social climate, which will be further discussed in chapter two. This study will explore the topic by posing the following research questions: (1) what are students' experiences in special interest organizations? (2) What do students self- report as a benefit or gain by participating? Sub-questions include: (a) why the student chose to participate in the particular special interest organization, (b) what are some important experiences in their participation?

Key Terms

In order to gain a better understanding the research question presented, a set of key terms are defined, (a) Special interest organizations (b) benefits, (c) student involvement, and (d) activism.

Special interest organizations (Dunkel and Schuh, 1998) bring people together who share the same interest, and represent the largest diversity in student organizations because of the large variety of interests that students have on any given college campus. To create a comparison or context of this classification, the reader should recognize other classifications of student organizations including: student government, Greek letter organizations, residence hall organizations, honors and recognition organizations, military, sports and departmental organizations.

Benefit, which will be used interchangeably with gain which is defined as: “1. something that promotes or enhances well-being; an advantage: The field trip was of great benefit to the students or 2. help; aid” (dictionary.com). The questions will be administered using these terms; however, the researcher understands that these terms will be self-defined by the participant. This study investigates the elements that are advantageous for the students involved.

Student Involvement is defined by Astin (1999), “refers to the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience “(p.518). It is generally measured quantitative (how many hours spent) and qualitative (how passive or active the involvement is) additionally the amount that a student is engaged qualitatively or quantitatively is proportionate to their personal development and increased involvement (p.298). The participant will have to self-identify as having a “high level of involvement” (see recruitment email, Appendix B) in the organization as a precursor for recruitment.

Participants in this study will self-identify as activists reporting that they have been involved with activism associated with their organization and its cause. According to Wikipedia *Activism* is defined as, “. . . intentional action to bring about social, political, economic, or environmental change. This action is in support of or opposition to, one side of an often controversial argument” (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Activism>).

Limitations

The limitations of this study include issues with timing and participants. The short time in which to solicit participants, conduct interviews, and analyze responses limits the number of interviews. The time constraint has also limited the number of institutions by which the data can be collected. Lastly, the time constraint yielded a smaller number of participants. All of these factors, and most importantly the qualitative nature of this study limit the generalizability of the research; however I believe it may serve as a great point from which to launch further research on the topic.

Introduction of the research

College is a time for development, for finding a voice, an identity, and a path paved in preparation for life to come. Many take advantage of the opportunities provided by the faculty and staff, and chose to engage in extracurricular activities that enrich their in class opportunities, to build relationships, to gain leadership experience and also to learn how to make change in the world. For many, there are several motivating factors for involvement including the building of relationships, or leadership experience. Some are motivated and experience an opportunity to help with the progress of society, educating others or calling an important issue to the attention of the community. The latter may be referred to as campus activists, and this research will identify what the

students experience within the realm of higher education and student organizations. I anticipate that this study of student involvement in special interest organizations of this type will produce a number of motivating factors for involvement, and outcomes of involvement including: joining to make change, struggling to accomplish their missions within the bureaucracy of higher education, building relationships with each other, helping the university and outside community, and gaining valuable transferable skills for their careers.

Through this study I will present current research supporting the current study, methodology, findings, and finally suggestions for further research. Suggestions for student affairs professionals on how to best work with the students who engage in special interest organizations of this subgenre on campus will also be provided.

Chapter II: Literature Review

The following literature addresses the research question by providing content as well as context surrounding the research area. This literature review addresses several topics in an effort to create understanding and further develop a purpose for the research. This literature review considers both the context of the research question (including student involvement and engagement), and concepts related to the study including special interest organizations, activism, and student activism. The review also includes a glimpse into the history and current cultural norms of campus organizing and activism. Furthermore, the research will frame the study and describe why the topic is worthy of exploration.

Student Involvement

This is a study of student development from a constructionist viewpoint, and it is helpful to present research surrounding the theory of student involvement. Student involvement can be a highly influential part of the students' lives, determined by student characteristics, the environment and the outcomes. The Input–Environment–Output (I–E–O) model was proposed by Astin in 1984 (Wolf-Wendel, Ward, & Kinzie, 2009). As Wolf-Wendel et.al. explains, “In I–E–O, individual characteristics are controlled for in order to isolate the effect of on-campus participation in various academic and social activities on various outcomes” (p. 411). The experiences and outcomes of the nature of a student's involvement can be a result of a student's *input* or characteristics of a student. Second, Involvement pertains to the student's *experience* or the range of experiences that a student has during college and lastly, it encompasses the *outcomes*, or the characteristics, knowledge, attitudes and beliefs after the experience in college. Thus, a student has positive outcomes in involvement opportunities whether academic or extracurricular, because the opportunities that a student embarks on increases the time and energy that a student puts into the activity.

“Involvement is the responsibility of the individual student, though the environment plays a role. The unit of analysis for involvement is the student and his or her energy; it is the student who becomes involved” (Wolf-Wendel, Ward, & Kinzie, 2009, p.425). The current study looks at the experiences of students who are involved with special interest organizations. According to Astin (1993, 1999), student involvement involves both physical and psychological presence and the extent to which a student is engaged is proportionate to their personal development. “Effects of student involvement

on development has, in fact, shown that interpersonal interactions are a primary contributor to overall development in college” (Astin, 1977, 1993a; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991 as cited in Antonio, 2004). The theory of student involvement (Astin, 1999) was a study of college drop outs. The 1977 study looked at factors that affected persistence in college. As a result of the study Astin (1999) discovered that virtually “every positive factor was likely to increase student involvement in the undergraduate experience, whereas every negative factor was likely to reduce involvement” p.524). Those salient activities that contribute to personal growth and development are involvement opportunities that elicit faculty, staff and peer interaction including residential living, on-campus employment, participation in sports, clubs and social fraternities and sororities. Other research has shown that students who are involved moderately are reported to have more personal development and learning than students who have (a) no out of class involvement or (b) out of class involvement that is substantially greater than the amount of in-class involvement (Kuh, Schuh, Whitt and Associates, 1991). This research on organization members in special interest, change-oriented activist groups may yield similar outcomes when viewed through students lived experiences.

Student Involvement in Special Interest Organizations

According to research on student involvement, out of class experiences can be a very important part of a college student’s development and other outcomes (Astin, 1999). Factors such as campus environment, campus resources, and student characteristics affect student participation in activities (Chang, 2002 as cited in Alkandari and Alshallal, 2008). Furthermore, students have a number of reasons for joining student organizations,

including: to become acclimated to the institution, to meet new people, to build upon one's experience and to balance out life and one's academic schedule, or to build a community around a common interest. "Understanding the nature of student's social communication and connections is critical because this socialization affects student success and retention rates (Alkandari and Alshallal, 2008, p.3). This research is especially important because it provides content for the possible experiences and outcomes of students in organizations centered on a student's interest. Some students join an organization to surround themselves with those who share the same identity, values, and interests. These organizations are appropriately called, Special Interest Organizations. Dunkel and Schuh (1998) explain that Special Interest organizations comprise the greatest number and diversity of student organizations they include, fads, subcultures, new games, media and new ideas. Examples of these student organizations are spiritual and religious organizations, LGBT organizations and Environmental action organizations (p.35). These organizations serve a special purpose, as the student members are given the opportunity to join together and identify their issues and concerns. El-Khawas states, "...because of the growing awareness that no set of categories can adequately reflect the full array of students. Further subgroups will emerge, both in regard to student background and situational differences" (Dunkel and Schuh, 1998, p.36). Students who get involved in organizations of this nature perhaps have not only special interests but also special issues, needs and experiences. Research suggests that the peer relationships in college effect how a student grows and develops "a college student's peers act as a reference group, or an environmental source of sociocultural

norms in the midst of which a student grows and develops” (Clark & Trow, 1966, as cited by Antonio, 2004).

Research on cultural student organizations, as a type of special interest group; for example, show that involvement with the organization provides an opportunity for students to become involved with these activities related to their particular interests and yield positive outcomes. These outcomes are shown in recent studies of special interest organizations centered on racial, ethnic, sexual orientation and religious identities. Special interest organizations in these cases serve as an area to grow assisting with group mobility and commitment, empowerment, faculty relationships, friendship and support (Kurotsuchi & Inkelas, 2004; Guiffrida, 2003; Renn, 2007).

Past studies have focused on cultural identity as a basis for an organization and while cultural special interest organizations facilitate growth based on a student’s self-identity or ascribed status (Hughes, Kroehler & Vander Zanden 2002, p.55) referred to by Sociologists; these are identities that are generally things we are born into. On the other hand, the current study sought to find the experiences of students in organizations that are centered on their socio-political identity or what sociologists refer to as achieved statuses (p.56). For example, the identity of an activist/environmentalist is assumed in this study to be different than one’s affiliation in a gender or racial group. Both types of identity statuses are building blocks for a feeling of group unity and a reason to come together as studies have shown, however the current study will focus solely on groups classified by one’s achieved status, their socio-political identity. In relation to Astin’s IEO model, these identities or statuses would be considered a student’s *input* (Wolf-Wendel, Ward, & Kinzie, 2009).

Previous studies showed the development of leadership, identity development or mobility within special interest organizations focused on an ascribed status (Kurotsuchi & Inkelas, 2004; Guiffrida, 2003; Renn, 2007). The difference of identity status may have a bearing on the experience with involvement, although it may produce similar results. In addition, membership in the group may increase a student's salience of identity in a sociopolitical group and increase their ability to engage in socially responsible leadership.

Socially Responsible Leadership

The intersection of involvement and students' capacity for socially responsible leadership is closely related to this study. Dugan, Komives and Segar (2008) investigated a college student's capacity for leadership across many intersecting identities such as race, gender and sexual orientation. Their study, grounded in the social change model of leadership development, shows leadership as "inherently tied to social responsibility and manifested in creating change that benefits the common good" (Dugan, Komives and Segar 2008, p.4). Astin and Astin (2000) describes higher education as perceived to be playing an important role in developing leadership capacity in college students, however, there are few faculty who work to develop leadership capacity in students. Furthermore, leadership development is undergoing a shift to the postindustrial models that show a more contemporary view of leadership which it is a process; leaders are collaborators who participate in development of ethical practices. Likewise, Biddix (2010) explains,

"The postindustrial paradigm of leadership that is consistent with is based on shared responsibility, the opportunity to create change, and inclusiveness (Rost, 1993). Signs of postindustrial leadership are often found on college campuses where wide-ranging opportunities facilitate shared and accessible experiences (Shertzer

& Schuh, 2004). Such characteristics can be critical for engaging students traditionally marginalized from formal leadership positions, such as women (Kezar, 2000; Romano, 1996), students of color (Arminio et al., 2000), and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) students (Renn & Bilodeau, 2005).

New theories of leadership development, such the Social Change Model (HERI, 1996) or the relational leadership model (Komives, Lucas & McMahon, 2007); show a turn away from leader-centric views of leadership that focus on positional leadership that is acquired through specific traits or behaviors. Rost asserts that the industrial paradigm is characterized as “individualistic, formal and synonymous with management” (Biddix, 2010, p.27). The postindustrial paradigm of leadership is inclusive and relational and honors the idea that when people come together with a common purpose positive change occurs (Komives et al., 2007; Biddix, 2010).

Research by Renn and Bilodeau (2005) showed that involvement in leadership and activism specific to the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) identity promoted the development of leadership identity. This suggests that active involvement in a special interest organization such as the ones in the current study may assist with the development of a leadership identity. As the students are involved in organizations that appeal to their interests and need for creating change, I would propose that they may experience a contemporary view of leadership which focuses on creating change as well as development of self and group commitment. The participants in this study may find that the values of the postindustrial paradigm of leadership are necessary for creating a positive organization and social change for those who are traditionally underrepresented in leadership roles. Considering the shift to a new paradigm of leadership as an influence on college campuses, one may need to consider the current political climate inside of

institutions of higher education in order to further understand the experiences of students within organizations that engage in activism towards change.

Activism on Campus-1960s to 2010

Student Activism on college campuses has been present for decades. United States in the 1960s and '70s, or currently around the world, “student actions arise from conflicts between competing forces in complex systems of power, whether those forces are explicitly political or whether they are ideological, physical, economic, sexual, or generational” (Boren, 2001, p. 5). Students have historically chosen to engage in activism on campus both to change things institutionally/locally and globally. The famous cases of students coming together for a cause arise in history courses, in programming such as the discussion of the civil rights movement and black history month events, and a new method of activism has come to fruition on the internet. However the methods students utilize seem to change over time concurrent with the causes themselves. The 1960s experienced an influx of college student movements for social change that included issues such as the Vietnam War, Free Speech and Student Rights and civil rights. Students created the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) which was one of the principal organizations of the American Civil Rights movement in the 1960s. SNCC members sat in at segregated lunch counters and engaged in the freedom rides to protest unfair treatment of African Americans. Students created organizations geared towards activism and participated in strikes, sit-ins, and marches often leading to incarceration, and as in the case of Kent State, even death. At Kent State University in 1970, four students were shot and killed by the Ohio National Guard while protesting the United State’s invasion

of Cambodia. This effort largely ended the surge of unrest in the 1960s (Levine and Cureton, 1998).

In the 1970s students from Oregon and Minnesota began organizations on campuses called PIRGs (Public Interest Research Groups), constructed to help students research social problems and help to collectively solve them (Levine and Cureton, 1998; PIRG, 2004). These groups grew to be national in scope by the efforts of Ralph Nader. Nader noted in 1972 in his book “Action for a Change” that students’ methods were beginning to change as the issues changed and he spoke to students on the issues of organizing for change from their standpoints. He noted serious issues with student organizing including continuity, recognizing that student PIRGs have had difficulty not only gaining funding but because as students graduated or became exhausted by the draining efforts to gain administrative approval. As student efforts diminished, the organizations would disappear or would have to begin from the ground up each fall as new students arrived or returning students regained energy. Nader went on to make the point, however, that “Social problems rarely adapt themselves to student schedules” (Nader and Ross, 1971, 1972).

In the 1980s there was a steep decline of activism in its popular form. Students began organizing locally rather than around larger national issues. In addition, a right wing grassroots movement emerged along with the corporate expansion and increased amount of consumerism in the 1980s. In addition, the 1980s saw the diminishment of progressive movements and went toward addressing needs of subgroups rather than collective goals. Some describe this time as one characterized by self-centeredness as the exhausted youth of the 70s became parents and dropped the ball. In the 1990s a

resurgence of activism appeared in the form of community organizing that very much resembles much of the activism of today. President Bill Clinton set the tone for the change as he began empowering others to act on behalf of the community in a surge of community service efforts including creating the Americorp organization in 1993 (Levine and Cureton, 1998).

Contemporary Activism. A 2009 article published on contemporary campus activism discusses a change in the face of activism over time, but note that students still encounter trouble when attempting to meet their goals. “Today’s student activists often employ different influence strategies than did their 1960s predecessors” (Hamilton, 2003 as cited in Barnett, Ropers-Huilman, & Aaron, 2009). Although research indicates that riots and sit-ins have given way to more mainstream influence strategies, such as election to student government associations, activists still face an uphill battle in their attempts to effect campus change” (p.333). This research describes many situations in which campus activism influenced campus policy and programs. It encourages college administrators to communicate with student activists effectively as it can be a way to help the University achieve its goals of inclusivity (p. 297), as these organizations can represent the variety of needs of students on campus.

Students are engaged in social justice work and have chosen to create organizations to meet the numerous needs and interests of students. Barlett (1998) showed a rise in social consciousness on campus and the increase of new groups to support the consciousness, and explained: “. . . traditional campus political groups have given way to a relatively new breed of organization, which might be called support/advocacy groups”. In addition, these organizations seem to stem from the

distrust of the government and traditional politics as they feel that neither are effective at creating change. However, the college student according to a 1997 study is very optimistic about change as opposed to previous decades, "Almost three out of four undergraduates (73%) believe that an individual can bring about change in our society. In the two prior surveys, nearly half of all students (45%) rejected this notion" (Levine and Cureton, 1998). However, they chose to act locally, and organizations on campus are a way to initiate that action, a quote about student activism describes the nature of activism and it's change over time,

"Students do not believe there can be quick fixes or broad scale solutions. They do not expect government to come to the rescue. Instead, they have chosen to become personally involved and to focus locally--on their community, on their neighborhood, and on their block. Their vision is small and pragmatic. They are attempting to accomplish what they see as manageable and what they see as possible. As one student said, "I can't do anything about the theft of nuclear-grade weapons materials in Azerbaijan, but I can clean up the local pond, help tutor a troubled kid, or work at the homeless shelter." (Levine and Cureton, 1998, n.p.).

Students have shown that they can recognize issues related to larger societal issues and mobilize local efforts to make change. Every day I am approached to sign a petition, donate money to a local environmental organization or register to vote. With the flux of technology as a method of communication and networking comes the creation of more convenient, faster and cheaper ways of organizing. For example, every day I receive at least one facebook petition to end, start or improve something in the world or locally. Many of these initiatives come from college students; many are affiliated with a student organization.

Contemporary student activism portrayed in the media showcases taking a personal or local stand on an issue. These stories are in line with the Levine and Cureton (1998) research explaining that students believe they can make change locally. Popular media stories on student activism reveals that students take action on things that they care about, but do so, on a local front. For example an article in the Chronicle of Higher Education focused on a Princeton student who engaged in “Freeganism” or scouring dumpsters for food to reduce waste. He described as “. . . not just about being cheap. It's not just about living off the waste of society. It's about trying to make an impact (Kolowich, 2009)."

Research on the influence of student activism on college students shows that the activity yields positive outcomes. Hunter (1988) explains that activism, whether conservative, liberal, or moderate, is evidence of students engaging in social consciousness (Biddix, Somers & Polman, 2009, p.134). A 2009 study of student activists shows that their efforts should be encouraged because they contribute to positive personal and developmental outcomes including: learning to consider diverse views, perceiving injustice, and questioning authority. All of these factors contribute to a student's development of civic consciousness and action and are skills necessary to participating in a democratic society. (Biddix, Somers & Polman, 2009, p. 134; Biddix, 2010). For women specifically, a 2010 study showed that for student activists “engagement was tied to peer mentorship, which created a sustainability cycle supporting women's interest in leading political and social activist organizations” (Biddix, 2010). Furthermore it provided the women opportunities to teach, counsel, and coach and encourages inclusivity. The existing research has shown that activism for students is a

positive developmental experience that provides students with necessary skills and growth experiences that opens their minds to multiple views, acting on behalf of injustice and becoming civically invested. The community through which student's organize provides opportunities for mentorship and fosters student involvement.

Conclusion

The literature discussed in this section shows the outcomes of student involvement. It explored a genre of organizations and changes in student leadership associated with increased social responsibility, and investigated the history of student activism. In addition, current literature presents an opportunity to investigate if the experiences of the participants in the current study are involved similarly and yield similar outcomes. The literature presents us with an additional opportunity to further explore the intersection of these concepts. A few things can be concluded from the review this research: (a) with the culture of student organizations as well as student attitudes toward change proceeding in a new direction, there remain many opportunities for professionals to help to assist students in their organizations, and (b) one must pay attention to the history and contemporary cultural context and climate surrounding the plight of student activists in order to best provide opportunities for these activists to be effective. This literature informs us about the essence of the culture of experiences of activists who are students bound together by a common goal or interest. It serves as an impetus for me as a researcher to explore this topic further, particularly at its intersecting points.

Chapter III: Methodology

This chapter describes the methodology chosen for this research project including (a) the purpose of study, (b) my perspective as a researcher, (c) methods for participant recruitment, data collection, and data analysis; and (d) personal limitations pertaining to the research methodology.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of students in special interest student organizations. As Special Interest Organizations yield the greatest amount of diversity in student organizations (Dunkel and Schuh, 1998), I came to the conclusion that there may be much left to discover about this genre of student organization and students' participation in the activities that take place in such organizations, where students get together based on a focal interest or idea. I have yet to discover research on this particular genre of student organization, unlike the research on Greek organizations, housing related organizations and other well-known genres in the realm of student involvement. Through this realization based on rigorous research and discussion with my committee about the broadness of my research, I came up with a way to investigate my perception of the nature of an organization that caters to one student interest, while bringing a more focused approach. Throughout my professional career I have been interested in students who are involved in social change organizing and noticed that there seems to be less faculty support for students who engage in such activities than for student government or residence life organizations. I began to think like a practitioner and decided to focus on the experience of student activists asking myself what the experience is like, and in what ways are they supported and challenged,

and what made them engage around a specific theme. My experience led me to believe that many college students are engaged in active exploration and less likely to engage in a long term, focused effort that seems to be required to create change.

I began looking at the categories of student organizations by asking the research questions (a) What are the experiences of students in special interest groups that are centered around social, political, environmental or economic change that engage in activism? And (b) What do they gain from their involvement?

My Perspective as a researcher

I first approached this study as an opportunity to conduct research on a topic that I found little information about, special interest student organizations. This classification and classifications in general of different types of student organizations sparked my curiosity about what the difference of the experiences of students in different types of organizations might be. As a student leader I experienced primarily the residential involvement experience, meaning that I was involved in leading programming efforts within my residence hall and within residence life a larger community on my university campus. I acknowledged as a practitioner that my experience contributed to my growth and satisfaction in college, creating much challenge and support within my time in college.

As a researcher I also acknowledged that there has been much research conducted on student involvement and most often the organization types that are researched are the residence life organizations, Greek organizations and student government organizations. I was curious about whether or not the frequency of research on these organizations also reflect the amount of institutional support for them. After this thought, I came to the

realization that the experiences of students in other types of organizations may be different than the current research on special interest organizations. In addition to the expected difference in amount of support, based on the literature I could find a different set of outcomes, and expected a different set of motivations due to the activism focus of the organizations.

Special Interest Organizations categorized by Dunkel and Schuh (1998) are organizations in which students engage in community activities themed around a specific interest; many are tied to identities. Because of the growth and development that occurs in college and the current active community oriented political climate, I thought that looking at organizations centered around a sociopolitical identity or affiliation coming together to engage in activism on campus would be an especially interesting student voice to listen to. I believed that through this research practitioners could get a better idea of how to support students with the motivation to act on campus. I asked myself primarily, why do students join these organizations? What are their experiences, what sort of support and challenges do they encounter, and is there a bearing on their experiences based on their interests?

Through this preliminary review of literature and brainstorming I realized that investigating the students experiences in organizations that are centered on a special interest would be a unique way to enter into a deeper exploration of a student's experiences. I elected to add an additional specificity that Creswell (2009) deemed an "event" or what the participants would be interviewed about doing. As I chose to focus the type of "Actor" (Creswell, 2009) from a special interest organization member to a member whose interests were centered around social, environmental, political and

economic change, I chose to further focus my the preference on students who engage in activism through their organization. It was my hope that by focusing the study I could listen to the unique experiences of student activists and recognize the special ways in which they experience organization activity and how they perceive that it influences their lives.

This study was created from what Creswell (2009) described as *Social Constructivist* worldview. When creating the study, I therefore acknowledged that individuals seek to make meaning of what they experience, and that they have various meanings. Thus the goal of the research from a social constructivist worldview is to “rely as much as possible on the participants’ views of the situation being studied” (Creswell, 2009, p.8). A component of qualitative research from this perspective requires an open-ended interview process in order to understand the context and the meaning of the student experiences. In this study I sought to fully understand the experience of student organization members who participated in activism around a special interest they hold. I believe this to be a very personal experience for students and thus the interview-based approach was adopted in order to better understand the view of the students who engage in these organizations.

Methods

This methods section discusses the (a) setting, (b) participant recruitment, (c) participants, (d) data collection, and (e) data analysis as each relates to this thesis study. This study was approved (September 25, 2009) by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Oregon State University (see Appendix A for IRB approval letters).

Setting. This research was conducted at a large, public, land grant university in the Pacific Northwest of the United States which shall be referred to as *Pacific Northwest University (PNWU)* in this study. I chose to conduct the study at a single university in order to explore the deep experience of students in one educational environment that would limit extraneous variables in their reported experiences. Because college students may have different experiences with support and challenge structures within one university, introducing another university structure would bring an additional variable and change the focus of the study.

The university (PNWU) promotes economic, social, cultural and environmental progress for the state as well as the globe through research, scholarship, outreach and engagement. The institution's core values include social responsibility and stewardship of the members of the university, who are committed to being stewards of the human, fiscal and physical resources of the community.

In terms of student involvement, PNWU provides over 300 student organizations representing several types including Service, Academic, Honorary, Co-operative, Religious/Spiritual/Philosophical, Social Awareness/Political, Sports and Recreation, Media/Publications, Professional, Greek and Ethnic/Cultural. The central student involvement entity is focused largely on social change, servant leadership and personal growth.

Participant Recruitment. This study employed a purposeful sampling method because of the specific focus of the study. According to Creswell (2009) in a qualitative study a purposeful sampling method is employed when the goal is to "best help the researcher understand the problem and the research question" (p. 178). The motivation in

choosing the qualitative study was to fully understand the experience of a population which participates in one type of student organization. In order to add depth and focus to the study, the participant criteria was narrowed down further from general special interest organizations, to special interest organizations that are focused on social, environmental, political or economic change and that participate in activism. Thus, the participant population was more focused.

The participants were selected through recruiting for specific criteria that characterizes the study. The five students who completed interviews, and the four of five that participated in the focus group reported having a high level of involvement in a special interest student organization that focus on political, social, economic and environmental change and participate in activism in the community and around campus. All participants reported that they had at least sophomore standing, above the age of 18 and been involved with their respective organizations for at least one academic year prior to the study beginning.

It was my intention to recruit up to ten participants for the study. In order to recruit participants, I retrieved a student organization database from the university clubs and organizations website. From there I searched the database for organizations which indicated in their missions or through the titles of the organizations that they may be special interest organizations focused on the social, environmental, political or economic change. From then I utilized the contact information from the organization database to contact the organizations approximately twenty in total, during the Fall quarter of 2009. An email briefly describing the study requesting their participation and the involvement of the members of their organizations that met the criteria was sent out with the attached

recruitment email (see Appendix B for recruitment materials). The recruitment email included a description of the criteria for participation in the study and contact information for the potential participants to email the researcher if they met the set of criteria. The participants were asked to self identify that they were at least 18 years of age, had been involved with the described organizations for at least one academic year and had participated in activism including but not limited to: letter writing, protests, economic activism, rallies, blogging or strikes for issues associated with the organization. Regretfully, these seven emails to more than twenty organizations total that fit my description produced only one participant response.

I chose to move forward to recruit more participants as I acknowledged that a single participant would not yield the rich data that I was looking for. I then sent a recruitment email to a student leader who had, during the recruitment process in Fall of 2009, coordinated a highly publicized sustainability organization sponsored, campus conference focused on activism and asked her to forward the recruitment email to other student activists. This effort yielded six more responses that indicated that they met the requirements, were interested in participating, and provided me with their contact information. This effort to recruit more participants changed the opportunity to recruit a sample that would be representative of all the areas of student activism that I was expecting from mass email recruitment.

A follow up email was sent to the seven potential participants with the research protocol (see Appendix C) and directions that they must read over the protocol and sign it before the interview could commence. Six of the seven potential participants indicated that they would like to participate in the study. The seventh potential participant did not

respond after the protocol email was sent. Through emails interview times were negotiated with five participants. The sixth participant began to negotiate an interview time, but later discontinued communication.

The participants who completed interviews reported having a high level of involvement in a special interest student organization that focus on political, social, economic and environmental change and participated in activism in the community and on campus. All participants reported that they had at least sophomore standing and had been involved with their organization for at least one academic year.

Participants. A total of five participants completed the interviews and four of the five participated in the focus group. Each of the participants was assigned a pseudonym by which they will be referred. A brief description of each participant is provided which includes information about the participant's self identity. It is important to note that possibly due to my final recruiting method, I achieved a more homogenous sample of women, all of which were focused on activism centered around social, feminist or environmental activism. In addition, my sample indicated an older group than I had anticipated which included all women between the ages of 21 and 27 who were either in their last year of undergraduate work or in a post baccalaureate program pursuing a PhD. This is important because it has some bearing on the applicability of the research on student involvement and campus activism due to the existing research being primarily conducted with undergraduate students.

"Gaia" is a 24 year old, female out of state student from the Midwestern United States. She is pursuing a PhD in Agricultural and Resource Economics. Previously she has completed a Bachelors and Masters Degree without a break in her education and has

been involved with many different social, environmental and non-profit student groups. Gaia strongly favors environmental justice and began an organization focused on cooperative education in the community. Through her primary involvement opportunity she learned of a university environmental justice organization in which she took on a role as the coordinator of the component that assists the campus and community on the maintenance of bicycles and advocates for sustainable transportation methods.

“Demeter” is a 27 year old, female out of state student. She is pursuing a PhD in Applied Anthropology. Previously she had experience in a teaching role at the college level, which she identified as a very important experience that influences her interactions with other students. However, Demeter did not become involved with student organizations until the past academic year as she never recognized a need for it. Demeter strongly favors the issue of food sustainability and security. She was encouraged by members of her academic faculty to join a local non-profit community food organization and through that experience began a campus food bank.

“Artemis” is a 27 year old, female who identifies as an older than average student. Currently a senior, she began her undergraduate education at the age of 24. Artemis chose not to get involved until her junior year when she applied to coordinate composting efforts at the University Sustainability organization. The organization is a student fee funded entity on campus that runs programs in sustainability, waste reduction, energy conservation, food systems, civic engagement and transportation. In the summer of her senior year she worked to plan a conference centered on women and environmental justice. Her interests on campus were to bridge the gap between feminist and environmental activism.

“Juno” is a 21 year old Senior in the honors college, and an international degree pursuing a bachelors in History and International Studies. Juno is highly involved on campus and has been since her first year and holds two on campus jobs. She is involved in many co curricular organizations but her primary activism experience has been in a Feminist organization in which she holds a co-president position. Her primary passion and focus is around global women’s issues and social justice.

“Pomona” is a 6th year undergraduate student in Anthropology. Pomona did not reveal her age in the first interview and because she did not attend the focus group I did not have the opportunity to ask her the question. Pomona identifies herself as “really involved with school and with student activities”, which revolve around food and nutrition. Her involvement is as a student employee who works with the University Sustainability organization where she coordinates the food systems where she works to help people change their relationship with food and thus changing their relationship with the environment. Pomona is very passionate about food sustainability inside and outside the classroom and is planning to pursue a master’s degree and a PhD in Nutritional Anthropology. Pomona went through the interview process but was unable to attend the focus group and therefore, the reference to her experiences will be solely from the individual interview.

Data Collection. Two methods for data collection were used in this study: (a) a one-on-one semi-structured interview, and (b) a focus group. The interview questions were designed to elicit answers to the research questions. The focus group was utilized as a method to collect data in an environment that would mimic the reflective discussion among student activists in a special interest organization. First and foremost, the focus

group provided an additional opportunity to follow up on themes that arose during the individual interview process and any other information pertinent to the topic. The data collection occurred from September 2009 through December 2009.

Interviews. I interviewed each of the six participants once. I utilized quiet, private spaces within the PNWU library. Before engaging in the interviews, the participants each signed the Informed Consent Documents. In an effort to create a comfortable environment for each participant I asked once again if they consented to being documented using an audio recording device, each verbally consented. To begin the interview process I asked the participants to speak clearly with appropriate volume. To ease into the questions and to get an idea of the self-identity of each participant I asked them to tell me about themselves. One participant asked me to clarify and I responded that I would prefer that they answer the question as if it was being asked by anyone. This question served as a means for me to find out any important information and through the discussion I was able to collect information on their major, age, years in college and/or years at PNWU, and some interjected information specific to the study including involvement experiences. Each participant yielded different amounts of information; however I felt this to be helpful in a study in which participants were instructed to discuss their experiences through their personal lens. As the interviews progressed I began to see a pattern that arose, one was that I had a very visually homogeneous population of white women. The second object of my interest was the age of the participants, although I only required that the participants be over the age of 18, each participant that indicated their age were between the ages of 21 and 27. As I began to listen to their responses to each question I realized that their age would have some

bearing on how they answered the questions, as the students were clearly able to synthesize their experiences in a critical manner and produce data that was complex. One student did not identify her age and through a discussion with my faculty advisor, I decided that the focus group would be a good time to follow up and ask each participant their age, the sixth participant however, I was unable to obtain her age given that she did not provide it in the interview and did not attend the focus group. However, I deduced from her comment that she was in her sixth year of her undergraduate experience that she was mostly likely in her mid-twenties, close to the age of the other five participants. In addition, I acknowledged that my population was racially homogeneous and homogeneous in gender. In chapter five I will discuss this implication as it relates to the current research on student involvement of the study and can begin a conversation on different identities and how it may influences the results of the study if repeated.

Each interview lasted approximately 20 to 45 minutes; the differences in the interviews were due to the conciseness or the loquacity of the respondent. I posed eleven open ended questions to elicit detailed responses about the nature of their involvement including their interaction with the organization including discussing their experiences, time spent, leadership positions held, how they became involved and why they chose their organization over others.

Following the research question on how they benefited from their involvement, I asked them to discuss moments of challenge and support and what they perceive as the benefits of being involved in the organization. To finalize the questioning, I asked each participant to tell me about what they would say to another student who was thinking

about getting involved in their organization, and ended by asking if they had any additional information to share.

These questions provided me with very rich data that led me to reexamine my original approach to the study. Through coding for themes I discovered the nature of their involvement, their motivation for becoming involved and how they discussed the benefits of the experience. Although the experiences were unique to each student, there were inherent themes that arose that were unexpected and struck a chord with me as an academic and a practitioner. To follow up I prepared a list of the themes that arose in the interviews as well as a few additional questions for the focus group.

I recorded each interview using a digital audio recorder. I then loaded each audio file to a password protected computer and although I had proposed using a confidential transcription service in my IRB proposal, I chose instead to transcribe the interviews myself and saved the text documents to a password protected computer.

Focus Group. As defined by Creswell (2009), a focus groups “is the process of collecting data through interviews with a group of people, typically four to six” (p. 226). Following the interviews, I emailed each participant to follow up, thanked them for their participation in the interview and asked them to provide me with their availability for a focus group. Also in the follow up email, I asked each participant to indicate whether or not they would like to review their transcribed interviews. None of the participants requested to review the documents. Through three attempts to coordinate their schedules myself I was unable to come up with a time that worked for all six of them. An additional effort was made by asking the participants to provide their schedules via a “Doodle Poll”, an electronic schedule synching system. In addition to the doodle link I

provided the opportunity for the participants to maintain their anonymity until the focus group by allowing them to only include their first names on the poll. The participants were aware that they would be meeting one another in the focus group. Only one of the participants included her last name on the poll, however. Once the results of the poll came in, I scheduled the focus group for the afternoon, due to the meeting occurring at noon, I included in the follow up email, the time, date, location and told the participants I would provide food.

The focus group was held in a closed conference room. I gave the participants directions about the volume and clarity of their voice for the audio recorder and began the discussion. All but one of the participants that had gone through the interview process participated in the interview.

Before we began I put a blank sheet of paper in front of each of them and gave them the instruction to utilize the paper as scratch paper to write down any ideas or take notes for their personal use in the case that they had an idea and the group was in conversation. After the focus group the scratch paper was shredded. To begin the focus group I asked each participant to identify themselves and their area of interest related to the research question as they felt comfortable. Additionally I asked them to identify their age as previously described; believing that this information was important to the study. During the focus group I listed the themes that arose through their responses, I asked them to comment on or question anything that they heard and informed them that I would have follow up questions. Through the discussion of themes, many of my follow up questions were answered and because of this only one follow up question was posed and

discussed. The focus group was recorded with a digital recorder and I transcribed it myself and saved the audio file and the document to a password protected computer.

Data Analysis

In order to examine the experiences and reported benefits of student activists in special interest student organization, the study uses qualitative in vivo coding methods (Creswell, 2009) to analyze interview data from the participants. Because these interviews were conducted from a social constructionist viewpoint, the analysis will rely on the coding of data that relies as much as possible on the participants' views of their experiences" (Creswell, 2009, p.8).

The in vivo coding method utilizes the participants own words to come to a conclusion about their experiences. The process of analysis began with the transcripts of all five interviews. The transcripts were then highlighted and penciled in the margins to denote themes. I then wrote down a series of themes that I saw as well as a list of questions associated with a response from one or two participants that would allow me to discover if that particular theme that I saw was valid. I then presented the themes to the focus group and asked them a few questions. From then I transcribed the focus group and began coding the interview responses with the focus group responses. The transcripts were all highlighted and penciled to denote themes and I eliminated some themes based on the clarifying responses of the participants in the focus group. I first re-coded the individual interviews and then coded the focus group on top to test the validity of the responses, so as to not influence the responses by the way in which I asked follow up questions. I did this to make sure that my report of themes did not bias the response. I recognize however that this approach of analysis may be a limitation to the validity and

generalizability of my study. In addition, the small sample size and the questions may have limited their responses to what I could or could not have been expecting. However, due to my careful coding for validity and tedious separation of themes that arose through the response of the themes of concrete lived experience of the participants, and my own analysis of the themes; I believe that my research and analysis is a good and valid representation of the responses of the participants.

In addition to coding the themes in association with the research question, I began to see themes emerge that were unrelated to the original research question including patterns of responses that denoted my view as a student development professional. I added those themes to the list of unexpected findings and possible areas for future research in chapter 5. These themes arose based on a separate lens through which I made an interpretation of the research, which may in a different study have been characterized as a *grounded theory* approach. Grounded theory is an approach involving “a researcher derive[ing] a general, abstract theory of a process, action or interaction grounded in the views of participants” (Creswell, 2009, p.13). In chapter five I discuss findings that are related to my analysis of patterns, also related to existing theory and research. This secondary approach I believe will give more depth to the study as a whole and help with the suggestion of future topics.

Chapter IV: Discussion and Results

Introduction

The participants in this study engaged in a two part interview session. First were one on one interviews, with five participants; second, a focus group with four of the five participants utilized to clarify themes discovered during the individual interview process.

All of the interactions yielded rich and interesting data that delves deep into the experiences of the students. I chose to focus the study on special interest organizations because I saw that there was very little research conducted on this type of organizational experience. The decision to focus on the sub-genre of self-identified student activists in special interest student organizations arose from my curiosity around the topic of social change and how it is initiated and lived on a college campus through student involvement. I wanted to know what their (a) experiences were and what they viewed were the (b) benefits of their involvement. To collect data on these two research questions I asked the participants to tell me not only about their experiences generally but why they chose the organization, and explored possible influences through asking them about their experiences with challenge and support. To answer the second research question concerning benefits of their involvement, I asked them directly about what they viewed as the benefits of participating in their organization. This chapter discusses the results, from the participants' perspectives, as the focus of the study was to gain perspectives of the special interest organizations through the eyes of the students.

Limitations. An important detail of the data collection process must be mentioned in accordance with these results of the study. (a) Four of the five participants were selected using a gatekeeper, or a person by whom a participant was connected in some way in that community. This is important because it shows that the themes that are presented may be characterized by a certain type of student that shares similar personality traits or demographic characteristics. (b) All of the participants identified themselves as women which may have some bearing on the responses. (c) All of the participants reported a progressive avenue of activism, or activism geared towards change, and

specifically changes in the realm of feminism and environmentalism. The significance of these facts is that they produce findings that may not be indicative of every type of activist. For example, student's participation in activism geared towards maintaining the status quo on campus or in society could possibly yield different experiences and benefits to the students. Therefore as a researcher, the nature of the activism and of the demographic characteristics or values of the student participants are homogenous and not representative of the student activist and organization member experience.

Themes

The participants reported a large number of experiences in the organization. These experiences shared between all or most participants occurred in experiences entering the group, while participating in the organization is presented in the next paragraph. The ten themes that arose through the coding process were the experiences shared between all or most (at least 3 of 5) of the participants. These themes are presented in the next paragraph in three categories: (a) moving in, (b) within, and (c) outcomes.

Experience Theme Categories. The first set of themes was discovered in three categories that stemmed from the questions surrounding their experiences with the organization. During the interviews I asked the participants to describe their experiences, their motivations for joining the organization, important experiences in the organization and to discuss their involvement generally. The categories of themes that arose that crossed over all questions were associated with (a) moving in (to the organization), describing motivations for involvement and experiences coming into the organization. (b) Experiences within the organization: described what the student's experience through

their involvement that describes the everyday experiences and overall culture of the groups. (c) Outcomes of involvement that arose through questions about their experiences. The outcomes theme is separated from the next set of themes because it arose through the first research question and not the second question about their reported benefits of involvement. However, similar themes arose based on the second research question. The three theme categories yielded ten themes with *community* crossing over all three theme classifications.

Benefit Themes. The second set of themed responses resulted from what the participants reported as benefits of their involvement derived from the second research question. In discovering this theme I coded responses from the question, “What do you feel are the benefits of your involvement? The set of themes are found in Table A.

| Table A: Themes Experiences (Theme Set I) | |
|--|---|
| Moving-In to the Organization (Moving-in) | |
| | Discovering a Niche |
| | Aversion to “traditional” student organizations |
| | Becoming a change agent |
| | Shared Power |
| Experience Within the Organization | |
| | Grassroots Organizing |
| | Faculty challenge and support |
| | Challenges with Peer support |
| | Mentorship |
| | Community (Moving-in, within, outcomes) |
| Outcomes of the Experience | |
| | Perseverance |
| Benefits (Theme set II) | |
| | Becoming a change agent |
| | Mobility |
| | Community |
| | Diversity |
| | Career Preparation |

Experiences. The themes that arose from the research question concerning experiences around participation with the category of organization are expressed in the following sections. Moving in themes are: (a) Discovering a Niche in which the participants describe that finding a place where their strengths could be utilized. (b) Aversion to “traditional” student organizations” a theme that describes student’s negative view of “traditional” student organizations and why they chose not to become involved with them. (c) Becoming a change agent describes student’s motivation to join their particular organization because they wanted to make change.

The next themes describe experiences *within* the organization including: (a) Experiences in: Shared Power/non-hierarchical structure. This theme shows that within the organization, there is a non-hierarchical structure that is focused on group consensus and community. (b) The Experience within: Grassroots organizing theme describes the participant’s experience creating or sustaining a new small grassroots student group. (c) Faculty Challenge and Support describes the dichotomy of positive and negative instances of interactions with faculty. (d) Peer Challenges depicts the challenge of communicating with peers. (e) Mentorship: Participant’s experiences mentoring new members of the organization that arose because of frequent turnover and the need to sustain the cause. (f) Community, a theme to describe the experience with relationships inside the organization, this theme occurs as a motivator, an experience and an outcome. The following paragraphs discuss the Experience in the organizations themes.

Discovering a Niche (Moving in). I found that all of the participants played many roles to stay involved and there was less emphasis on positional leadership. Rather, the participants indicated that they joined to make change and through discovering a

niche where they could help they found their place. Most of the participants discussed holding many roles over the course of their involvement.

For example, Artemis mentioned being involved as a staff person, a volunteer and a programming grant recipient. They focused on meeting the needs of the community and educating the community on issues there was only one participant that described herself as always “being a leader” (Juno). Gaia explained,

“I went to a meeting or two and I could see the niche I could play in the group . . . there wasn’t much of an organizational component . . . So I felt I could play a significant role, well why not, I like bikes, this could be it!”

Furthermore, Gaia reflected on her niche in the organization after an experience of conflict between a member of her organization and an administrator, “Something I do a good job at is kind of figuring out when those tensions are about to us and when you have to step in and change something because a lot of people look the other way cause it’s awkward. . . I have tried hard to be this, communicator/liaison between anyone that we need to talk to make sure that things go smoothly”. For most participants discovering a niche was an important motivation or experience moving into the organization. They also reported aversion to “traditional organizations” as they didn’t feel that they would fit within the organizations.

Aversion to Traditional Student Organizations (Moving In). All of the participants reported a distinct difference between the organizations that they involved themselves with and those that they identified as “traditional” student organizations. I heard this perception of a certain type of student group that they named to be

“traditional”, rise in two of the individual interviews and decided to ask them about it further in the focus group.

For example, one student explained that her motivation for involvement with her organization is that it was a link between the University and the Community. She expressed that she would like to be out of the “student bubble”, describing it as a place where she could find a lot of resources but expressed interest in transitioning out of the realm of student organizations. Gaia explained, “I really wanted to see what it was like to organize in more a community sphere”. Furthermore, she was aware of herself encountering a transition period:

“That was really important to me not just to feel like another silly student group with our ideals. I really feel like I am in this transitional period from becoming a student to more, but I’m still a student, but I consider myself a little more of an adult. I feel like I am part of my neighborhood and care about things outside of the university. That was a really big important thing”.

This theme of separating themselves from “traditional student organizations” emerged even more as I brought it into question in the focus group. The students commented on how they felt they were different and that what they voiced as “traditional groups” was not right for them in many ways. For instance, Juno felt that students joined student government not because they wanted community involvement but because they wanted to improve leadership skills for later in life. Furthermore Juno connected the importance of a flattened leadership model to her and the difference between other organizations and the ones that she felt the group identified with,

“And then from [involvement with our organizations] we derived the skills-but we didn’t go into it just for the skills-very much for

the issue-and that's why we have this shared power issue because we see similar drive in others. Who am I to say that my passion for this is more than anyone else's? So therefore, we are going to use this shared passion to do something instead of being like, 'my passion clearly is the most and therefore I'm president, and let's go from there'."

Gaia commented on the structure as well explaining how she felt about the culture of "traditional student groups",

"[Traditional student groups], those who use Robert's rules of order, those are different. The feel, the environment, it's hard for me to stay in one of those meetings and usually there is a few people who have big roles and then everyone else is, I don't want to say, a sheep. Just there, getting free food, hanging out, it is on their resume and whatever".

Artemis described the experience of working with "traditional student organizations," "I had a stereotype and generalization about student groups to be pretty fluffy and pretty not moving toward real change". She had an experience joining an organization that was associated with her major and was described as "not working towards change". This experience informed her decision to find an organization that could be or was more consistent with her goals of becoming a change agent.

Some comments about disinterest in "traditional student organizations" expressed distaste, for instance, Artemis interrupted a comment, by describing the organizations as "competitive and cutthroat". Juno and Gaia commented that most of their organizations seem to be smaller, and Gaia added that the boards are bigger. What I concluded was that the students felt like what they valued collaboration and consensus in an organization, rather than a larger hierarchical organization with fewer in power. The

collaboration and consensus was not present in what they viewed in “traditional student organizations”.

Becoming a change agent (Moving in). All participants described that their motivation for becoming involved was to make change, each had their own passions and way by which they came to the organization but all wanted to make a difference. For instance, Gaia explained, “I didn’t want to get involved with something that isn’t very fruitful”. Demeter explained that having never been involved in traditional leadership organizations she looked at student organization involvement as a vehicle for her goals around organizing, “I pretty much got involved with that here in terms of leadership when I came here and I wanted to start a [food pantry] on campus so I sort of needed a student group to help get that going”. Artemis reported having a “visceral” experience living an entirely sustainable life and so coming back to school as a non-traditional student she wanted to continue her work with food sustainability and so looked at ways of getting involved on campus. Juno described the pathway to the organization that came from a distaste for inequality, “I came to college and realized that some people think that women shouldn’t do certain things and that kind of upset me and so I just kind of naturally moved into activism, always done activism, been involved in leadership and clubs and stuff like that so I came to college looking for how I can help”. Furthermore, Pomona spoke about her motivation to make change through education, “I love food so much that I could talk about it all day long so- I want to be involved in it and I want to bring an awareness and people to change their relationship to food and I had to make money to live and this had an appeal because you can get paid for [working in the organization]”. This theme was the strongest, of the three discussed because it was

emphasized repeatedly in the individual interviews and in the focus group by all of the participants.

Shared Power/non-hierarchical structure (Within). An overarching theme was that the shared power model within their organizations was not only desirable but necessary; additionally some discussed a degree of challenge associated with shared power. It is also important to note, as described in the previous theme that for the participants a hierarchical model of leadership was viewed as negative and ineffective. Artemis first motivated by the need for a consensus model explains that she was attracted to the involved [sustainability organization], because it “functions really non-hierarchically”.

Gaia explained that in her organization they work hard to not only govern the organization based on community input model but they also see the need to be significant. “We are really hesitant to get ourselves stuck in a box. If we are going to be relevant to the community-which is supposedly who we are trying to help and work with, we have to be adaptive”.

Gaia, a vocal advocate for shared leadership in an organization gave an explanation of the many reasons why this model is desirable. For instance in describing her first experience in an organization she left to join with others, “I was the only organizer and I wasn’t interested in being the sole organizer...Everyone else was dependent on me to decide what happens. So in the end I just joined all of the other groups because I would prefer to have a better base for organizing”. She described the culture of the shared leadership model of her organization, “we all work by consensus so everyone has to be in agreement...” Gaia’s organization established a board of directors

to make sure that goes against the top down hierarchical structure that she saw present in other organizations “we are really interested in who takes on positions of power and try to be careful about certain folks-you know-dictating how things work”. For Gaia, power within the organization is something that has to be managed to make sure that everyone has input, new and old members realizing that it is also an adaptive process depending on the situation.

Juno serves as a co-president in the [Feminist Organization]. She goes on to explain the importance and reasoning for shared power,

“[I] believe it is necessary to train the younger or newer members of the group to be able to fill those leadership positions because no one person in a grassroots organization should ever have power more than a year or so and everyone in the group should be trained so that those who cycle in and out of these issues can continue to fight for social justice because it’s an ongoing fight”.

Pomona also talks about the organization and how it engages people equally,

“[in the] group I take on the role as co-facilitator we restructured the group so technically it’s like co president but we want to give people equal ownership so we structured it as facilitators as people overseeing kind of organize I guess”.

Furthermore she explains, “my experience with that has been, just the mentality, just the structure of it, that’s why we changed the structure of the [food sustainability organization], we work as team we don’t even use words like ‘I did this project’, we never take full ownership of anything . . .”

During the focus group I reflected on this concept of shared power to have them discuss that further, Gaia explained that she didn’t believe that the model held true for other student groups. In her experience, “[The consensus model] took a long time for our

group . . . to learn that process and it's kind of an institutional learning that had to go on, you're constantly figuring out". She mentioned that she thought that not all groups that try utilizing the consensus model are successful. However, all four participants discussed the commitment it takes and how difficult it can be if there isn't a level of care for the group members. For the participants they had a desire to sustain a shared model of leadership and furthermore, grounded by the similar values, especially when forming a new group, Gaia explained, ". . . the initial formation of a group, it's important that you have similar values and similar end goals, you don't really know, you start out with this group of people and you are excited about something but it may or may not result in something that the group wants to move forward on together. . .". A second theme suggests that this need to build consensus is linked to their experiences with building a new organizations.

Grassroots organizing (within). In all stories there is a consistent theme of needing to establish organization either as an ongoing process or because the organization is a new grassroots organization. For example, Demeter shared the experience of her organization restructuring completely to work more effectively for the community given recent community progress for food sustainability. Demeter explained that she had to follow many steps to implementing her organization that would help the community; she needed to establish official student organization as well as non-profit status to get the [food bank] established.

Juno explained that her experience allows her to make connection to the University and connects her to the outside world ". . . so I think that people need to put the roots down somewhere and the best you can do are probably grass roots that can

change how the world looks cause it is very easy in college to get so focused on your work so focused on whatever you are doing and it's nice to be able to surface from that and realize that you are still connected to the bigger picture”

Gaia encountered issues with her new organization and so she decided to go onto a different path, in connection with the previous theme, she felt that she should move to a new organization that incorporated more people because she didn't want to be the only organize, because in a grassroots organization there needs to be more participants to have a better base for organizing. In the establishment of the new organization she reported experiencing creating a infrastructure to sustain the organizations including: public identity, rules, mission, programs and policies.

Another issue that came up pertaining to grassroots organizations is that the ones they participate in are new and require the buy-in of everyone to figure out how they will approach an issue. They explained that they perceived that organizations like student government and hall governments, “inherit a structure and there is a set number of things they need to do as a group”, according to Juno. This comment discussed in the focus group was agreed on by all participants and shows furthermore, the difference between their experiences in grassroots organizations that those “traditional student organizations”

In addition to general comments about experiences creating grassroots organizations, Juno articulated during the focus group how she felt about the nature of the students who participated in the study,

“... we aren't going to wait until someone tells us, 'here's the march, why don't you go join it!' or 'here's the food conference, do you wanna go?' We are the ones to come up with it and be, 'hey

how are we gonna do this'. I guess that pioneering spirit is something that we all seem to have in common".

Faculty Challenge and Support (within). One theme that I discovered through the interviews was a dichotomy of a struggle or fear of the University and support from the University. The participants felt that it was difficult to sell their cause to the student body but also had a fear of the "University" getting in the way of their work; their experiences appeared to inform their perceptions.

I delved deeper into the source of the negative relationship with the university that I had discovered in the individual interviews, appeared to have come from the fact that the University is seen as a powerful and complex bureaucracy that could intercept their progress including the experience of being forced to define themselves as either an entity of the University or a non-profit, they did not feel like they should have to worry about that.

"The fact that the [sustainability organization] was part of the University made me feel like they were doing whatever the University wanted and they weren't their own entity . . . I realized that working with them, you have a lot of power because you have a lot of money and that's kind of cool but they also seem to have a lot of independence in certain respects" (Gaia).

For a few of the participants, one negative experience with the University further fueled their desire to be separated from it and they were willing to go above the University to achieve goals they felt were more important than bureaucracy. Gaia reported an uncomfortable and confrontational relationship between the sustainability organization and a representative of the administration as they fought against having to define themselves as an organization. However, through further investigation in the focus

group the participants uncovered moments of support from faculty and other professionals on campus. Instances where they felt supported were in experiences with leadership training, faculty support for projects and funding. However, the experience varied depending on the general location of the student for example, Demeter, who is in a PhD program that is largely applied had a greater amount of support than Artemis who expressed the need for one of her faculty to identify her passions and support her in mobilizing them, making it more challenging to find her way to a place to involve herself.

. This theme seemed to also come from the sense of purpose that the participants experienced, for instance, during the focus group Artemis explained,

“Sometimes it feels pretty scary to see such a need for something to happen but realize how much power the University could have over just vetoing that from happening . . . it feels like when you have your values on the line like that, there is a lot at stake. It kind of feeds into the adversarial feelings about the university”.

The participants felt sometimes that the University did give them support but had some bigger obstacles selling their mission to students, “I’d rather fight the man than the man’s minions” (Juno).

Challenges with peer support (within). Most of the participants experienced challenges associated with gaining peer support of their issues. Gaia described the difficulty with choosing how to approach an issue when discussing it with students, and is uncomfortable with the idea of only selling the practical steps versus selling the movement as a whole. This is a decision that one participant thought was different than other organizations.

For instance, in one interview, Juno explained that as an activist she has to recruit others to the cause by explaining why it is important and has to continue in the work that she does,

“There are so many ugly stereotypes and it is a constant battle of fighting letters to the editor or angry counter protests that can get very tiring and abrasive but there are ways that can be dealt with that”.

When I asked the group about recruiting in the focus group, Demeter identified recruiting and having to explain what you are doing as something that all student organization members, the other three participants felt that recruiting was difficult because of having to articulate a more difficult concept for people. Gaia explained,

“A lot of our issues are multi-issues . . . under the guise of one issue that we are really focusing on. . . Different systems of oppression, I’ve got one idea that I’m working on, but I try to keep everything else kind of in there so when you are forming an organization and explaining what you do, I’m not promoting bikes, ‘Go get a bike!’ It’s so much deeper than that. Explaining all the reasons why I want you to ride a bike that would take me forever”.

Juno echoes this comment by explaining:

“It’s so hard to fight the stereotypes of what a feminist is. [People ask] ‘You mean women are better?’ No. You have to explain that and by the end of it you come off as quite defensive instead of actually explaining why this is such a positive thing”.

Artemis explains the difficulty discussing issues and that it takes creativity and group consensus in order to find a way to effectively spread the mission of the organization, She articulated and all members during the focus group confirmed that they have to chose how to approach an issue with peers. The approach also requires that

through your creativity you find a way to “chip away” at the issue, however that is made possible at the time through resistance or by proposing a positive way to create small amount of change that paves the way for work with larger issues.

“I think it’s challenging because we are all in issues driven position and activism, so. . . It’s a really difficult balance to strike between educating people about what’s wrong and not just doing that and also being like ‘this is what we can do’.”

Artemis also described the need to frame the issue at times so that it can be sold to someone who isn’t interested in the larger goal of institutional change:

“About framing the issue . . . I kind of go back and forth. I go into it really deep with someone who I think is going to understand or be interested and then someone who I think isn’t really interested I flop the whole way through and I really become sort of like a marketer, which is something that I don’t think I should become; but I find myself selling my idea if I can think of a way to get it to this person. I feel like the bikes luckily is really easy, I can do all kinds of things to get people to like bikes and I go all over the place with it. I don’t know if that’s totally moral sometimes; giving up on the harder deeper part of it. I also think that people aren’t ready for it. Some of those parts, you can get a little of it in there, but if you scare them away with the big stuff they’ll never come back. You have a chance to developing a relationship to get to the point where you can get to the deep stuff’.

For most of the participants the issue of “selling” the concept of change was especially difficult because it doesn’t feel right to only approach the issues from a concrete perspective. They participants experienced having to negotiate with themselves ways to approach a subject with a peer because a lot of the larger systemic issues, and the root of their involvement, are met with resistance and misunderstood.

Mentorship (within). All participants discussed the experience mentoring new members. For instance, Demeter commented, “I’m assisting a new member who is still you and getting her leadership, you know-sea legs so to speak”. Mentoring others became a big theme of their experiences, they discussed experiences learning to help new participants and having to do it frequently because the continuity of the organization depended on it.. In other words, these experiences were vital in these organizations because it means that the organization and the movement can endure on campus, especially because the participants experienced frequent turnover. .

Juno expressed the importance of “training” new members of the organizations,

“[I] believe it is necessary to train the younger or newer members of the group to be able to fill those leadership positions because no one person in a grassroots organization should ever have power more than a year or so and everyone in the group should be trained so that those who cycle in and out of these issues can continue to fight for social justice because it’s an ongoing fight”.

Gaia gained experience not only managing but figuring out how to help and mentor new members in a space that is really about finding the intersection between your strengths and what is needed. “Plugging people in appropriately can sometimes be a dance, figuring out what they want-what they are good at-where you have space for them”.

In regards to turnover in the organization Gaia and Artemis explained their experience when leaders who have a high level of involvement and are integral decide to discontinue their involvement. Gaia explained, “We have a lot of people come and go, some people who have been just wonderful, people that have really helped the organization going and then they got burned out”. The participants showed that in spite

of their difficulties with turnover of members; the participants reported enjoying mentoring new members, and furthermore, felt supported themselves by their organizational community.

Community (moving in, within, outcome). As explained in the introduction, when the participants discussed both motivation for joining and experience within the organization they mentioned having a community. Juno explained that, “I’m around people that care just as much as I do and even something’s more-to be involved with that during college . . . that plays a huge part-the communities mindset-just being around so many people who care-I don’t know-I really couldn’t verbalize how incredible it is-how many people are so inspired-it gives me hope”. During the focus group Juno described that she felt this way about all activist organizations in her experience:

“Specifically activism oriented group there’s always gonna be that passion that I think is the most supportive”. She went on to explain how people’s differences and passions are supported, “. . . we know that we know that where certain people have more passion with eating disorders or this part of feminism or this part of activism work and so we can really use these difference to try to come together as leaders and have programming that people can actually support and no one is just showing up because they feel obligated”.

Gaia discussed community as a motivator, “I moved here, I was looking for a group to be part of. I’d been really active in environmental justice organizations in . . . called “Free the Planet”, it was my favorite group ever, all of my best friends were in that group. I’ve just always been a group oriented person so I was kind of looking for something to be a part of and I really hadn’t found anything. . . I ended up starting this group called [Do it yourself cooperative].”

The participants reported that they really felt supported by their peers in the organization. Pomona explained how she is supported even when the work is long and hard “I’ve never, not felt supported”. This theme stood out as one that spoke to the unique experiences within special interest organizations.

Outcomes of Involvement. Throughout the study, I noticed that the participants reported outcomes that were not attributed to their motivations. Additionally, there were many reported benefits that were not associated with motivations or outcomes consistently. This will be discussed in chapter five as it was not a part of the original research question. However, there was one main reported outcome of their experiences that the students found as a result of their involvement: positive growth due to a challenging experience that allows them to persevere.

Perseverance. All women were given the opportunity through their involvement with the organization to be challenged outside of their comfort zone and persevere. “That kind of experience of perseverance was really, personally really important to me” (Artemis). The student organization allowed her to gain experience that would build her confidence, give her opportunities to build skills and give her the challenges that would force her to have to persevere in order to meet her goals. Similar situations occurred with all participants and all reflected on how they served as growth experiences. Gaia mentioned learning how to work with tools as a new skill and being outside of her comfort zone, having to ask for help and learning to gain trust with people when she is in a position where she knows nothing about her environment. She explained, “Having to trust that these people are going to be ok with me not understanding and they’re gonna help me and that’s, yeah, that’s been good for me as a growing experience”.

For Demeter being outside of her comfort zone involved becoming involved with student organizations in the first place.

“I don’t think I actually saw the value in student organizations, I viewed it as a way for people to socialize if they really wanted to socialize a particular issue or topic or activity . . . Then it took a particular idea, a project that I could see as very much doable. . . It was a random act of opportunity that really drew me into student organizations and I really am glad that I have an-that I’ve got so much out of it-and it has been a good thing for me teaching wise as well-that my classroom experience is now coupled with advising experience and helping student to do things that are beyond strictly their academics, their classroom experience, their classroom education”.

Another experience overcoming a difficult experience occurred with living through new experiences related to interaction with others. Gaia gave two examples, “Being one of the few females in the group . . . this has been the first organizations where I’ve worked with mostly men and a lot of older men too, so it’s been both a lot of men and people of different ages, two new things for me”. Gaia explains, “. . . this group of people [homeless] that we all have ideas about, but if you haven’t actually talked to someone-everybody’s different you know, different situations that they’ve been in to get in that way, that space”. For Gaia, working with homeless, she learned that her previous conceptions were false as she worked with the homeless on a daily basis she learned about them, their situations and how she could best help them, by providing services and a voice on their governing board.

Reported Benefits. The second set of themes arose from the second research question which “What are the benefits of involvement in special interest student organizations centered around social, environmental, economic or political change?” The

participants reported that there were many benefits, both personal and universal benefits for the common good. The question that I asked “What do you gain from your involvement with the organization?” seemed to prompt more responses about the universal benefits rather than personal benefits which I found quite characteristic of the group that I interviewed, possibly because their ultimate goal of involvement is to elicit change. However, their personal and universal benefits melded together as they described personal intrinsic benefits of social change including: (a) Becoming a change agent, (b) Mobility, (c) Community, (d) Diversity and (e) Career preparation.

Becoming a change agent. The first benefit was knowledge that they were making a contribution for the benefit of the community. The participants felt that making change was not only a personal benefit but a benefit for the larger community. “I think that what we are doing is important-that it is valuable to the community that we’re at, not just on local arenas but also on a global scale. That whole, act locally, think globally”. Gaia recognized the benefits of her organization’s actions as an agent for local and global change reduced the environmental impact of transportation.

Juno explained that the benefits of being in the organization are helping to build upon a larger movement, and additionally she connected the gains to benefit the future of her family.

“[The goal is] an equal world, it sounds cheesy but social justice work often does when you take it out of context but we live in the world together and everyone should be equal they should be “parejo” (*Spanish meaning level or even*) should be on the same level, everyone should be there and there is no philosophical historical reason why that shouldn’t happen and the benefit is that we are working towards that. . . for me its knowing that someone is

doing this work, it is getting done, that is what is most beneficial at the end of the day and knowing that when I eventually have children, if that happens and when anyone that I am related to or love live in this world that it will be perhaps a little more just and we are not ruining the world, that kind of a thing, we are keeping things at least level and probably a little better”.

Pomona echoed that comment by explaining how her actions are connected to the larger picture of the future associated with general societal awareness and change, “. . . relate that to absolutely everything in my life cause you really don't-you don't ever know and with this it just brings awareness and I think it also reduces disrespect, discrimination and oppression and brings everyone on the same level-it kind of erases the haves and have nots, although they are the have nots technically because they don't have food-but because you are helping them it creates that teamwork mentality”.

In the focus group I discussed the benefits that I heard in the interviews including skill development, learning about the community and interacting with people who are different from themselves. Juno recognized the benefits but interjected that that is not why she joined the organization, she just found herself with those skills as a result, a finding that arose as a result of the first interviews. I will discuss these further in chapter five.

Mobility. Three of the five participants reported a gain from involvement in the organization that is linked to mobility inside and outside of the University. Artemis explained her experience working in a student organization and how it helps with self progress and mobility,

“If you're involved in an official organization then during your time at the university you have that organization kind of behind

you if you want to, you have a problem and you need to speak to an authority”. The more that you are visibly in a position of leadership on campus, the more people of authority on campus would recognize you for that and you know, be able to give you a letter of recommendation”

Gaia explained that, “I’ve used my experiences in student groups just mean-I’ve learned a lot of things by having to work with other people in these kinds of groups-just life skills really”.

Juno sought out a place where she could be involved that would connect her to her future goals,

“Beyond everything I just want to learn, it’s kind of why I want to go into academia, kind of my future goal; I like to learn, like to be able to explain things, I like to know where they came from, being involved in clubs lets me know that I am part of the process of where it comes from”.

Community. Community is a major benefit that was present through all of the participants stories as previously described is a motivator for involvement in these organizations, and the experience that they have but it is also a perceived benefit of involvement. For Gaia the benefit was “Community, first and foremost, just getting to know people, feeling like I have a place where I am valued, respected, people know who I am and especially from the being new it is really nice to go to someone-you have a second home somewhere . . .” and in the focus group Gaia talked about how having the community around her that allows for the discussion of new ideas around the topic, it excites her and keeps her motivated. Artemis explained “Finding a network of people that have a common interest, so it’s a good, socially it’s a beneficial thing to do. . .I think it gives a student, kind of a framework to network with”.

Artemis described finding a “sense of belonging . . . validation that there are other people who care about the same things that I do”. Juno described her experience finding community around an issue that she feels is hard for people to understand, “It’s very fun to meet the other people that do see feminism as a positive thing, it’s not a negative thing, they don’t automatically shut off if you self identify as a feminist, or walk away. Or are afraid you are going to be an angry woman or something like that so that has been nice to know there is a community of people that feel the same way that I do”. This theme was resounding among all stories as the special interest organization appeared to be not only a source of social and professional development and mobility but also about building community of friends that have similar values, interests and goals.

Diversity. Similarly to the benefit of community, the theme of awareness of Diversity came out in more than one area. I noticed that learning about those groups in which they had little knowledge of, was not only an outcome of involvement, but also discussed as a perceived benefit by most of the participants. For example, Gaia explained, “I’ve learned a lot about homeless people since I started working at the [bicycle cooperative] . . .” Gaia felt, as previously explained that she wasn’t familiar with the homeless outside of known stereotypes, as a result of her involvement she learned about the homeless and has regular positive interactions. Furthermore, Pomona explains that she learned a lot about people as well, “I have to admit before working at the food pantry I’ve worked at other soup kitchens and soup banks and its almost all homeless and you forget that people that look like you or I that don’t appear to be nutritional insecure or have a food insecurity”. Pomona’s stereotypes of the image of the food insecure were changed due to her involvement with the [food security organization].

Career Preparation. Another perceived benefit was the ability to experience work that the participants wish to engage in, in the future. Gaia explained,

“I think being part of some of these groups-it’s definitely a microcosm for reality-depending on what you’re experiences have been, depending on if you have worked a job or what kinds of jobs you have worked . . . I think it is very valuable to work with these groups and to see how hard it is, it can be to work on a project and how exciting it is when something actually happens”.

Demeter explained,

“Working with [food security organization], I think that’s really helpful experience for me, not only in terms of organizing and making my future activism efforts more effective and whatever areas but also since I intend to continue teaching at the collegiate level when I finish this degree”.

For Demeter, she connected her support of students while working to develop and sustain her organization as experience that would relate to her love of teaching and also activism. She also described the experience as a great networking opportunity. Demeter explains:

“. . . it’s been such a great experience because I see people come in and they are so happy to get food and it’s like-I’m going to be doing this forever, maybe not specifically at this food pantry. But this has just become kind of my realization that I want to be directly helping people put food into their mouth. And whether it’s advising them on what food or it’s literally ordering it from the regional food bank and getting it and providing it in this space like I am right now”.

Artemis described her experience as benefiting her confidence and a valuable experience working within a bureaucracy . . . “as frustrating as it is-the majority of our experiences, if we want to create any kind of change-that have to be done through

interfacing with bureaucracy. As silly as it seems sometimes, it's what you have to do, so it's good to know how it works".

Pomona also echoed development by explaining the opportunity to learn new ways to work with people, ". . . relate that to absolutely everything in my life cause you really don't-you don't ever know and with this it just brings awareness and I think it also reduces disrespect, discrimination and oppression and brings everyone on the same level-it kind of erases the haves and have nots, although they are the have nots technically because they don't have food-but because you are helping them it creates that teamwork mentality". Overall the participants felt that they gained skills and experiences related to their future career aspirations, a positive outcome of student involvement.

Conclusion. How wonderful it is that nobody need wait a single moment before starting to improve the world", Anne Frank (www.brainyquote.com). These students live this mission through their experiences and motivations for joining special interest organizations. They perceive college as one single opportunity among many to enter a movement towards initiating social change, but that is not the number one reason why they joined the organizations; they joined because they have vision for change and found a community in which to find support with people with similar values and interests. I have found through this research that community is not only a motivator for joining the organization but also an outcome and a perceived benefit by the participants. The participants expressed, true to my research topic that they sought out and enjoyed the experience of engaging in work with peers with similar interests. I also found that throughout most of their responses they seemed to give parallel examples of the culture of their organizations while explaining the culture of a social movement. This is

important and it suggests that student affairs practitioners may find it useful to study social movements when working with these students and furthermore may indicate that utilizing methods for building a strong movement may be helpful in guiding students to build a successful special interest student organization for student activists. Furthermore, the associated obstacles in the journey for social change student organizations are largely due to difficulty not only mobilizing with the University rules and regulations looming, but also gaining more student members to their organization.

Not unlike the creation of a social movement, student organization leaders must engage others effectively in order to educate them and inspire them to make change as well. As this study shows, this process has many obstacles. In the next chapter I will discuss one of the biggest obstacles more in depth, as I have seen a clear disconnect between students along different levels of cognitive development. My research has shown that it is difficult to transform students into more complex critical thinkers unless it is done in an appropriate way that matches their threshold of disequilibrium. Plainly, explaining the need for environmentalism and feminism is difficult for students with a dualistic mind who only view feminism, for instance, as the belief that “women are better than men” as Juno explained. The ability to build community around a topic is not only comforting for the students but it also allows the exchange of ideas that leads to more advanced cognitive development.

One last important point is that as these participants were women and engaged in more progressive or liberal forms of activism, their experiences relate to the existing literature on both socially responsible and postindustrial leadership and women in

leadership roles. The participant's characteristics show a manifestation of postindustrial leadership, based on shared responsibility, the opportunity to create change, and inclusiveness. This study is consistent with research by Shertzer and Schuh (2004) which found that college campuses have many opportunities that facilitate shared and accessible experiences and are critical for engaging students who are traditionally marginalized from formal leadership experiences.

The traits of leadership in the organizations described by the participants influenced their willingness to become involved in the organization. Kezar described themes in the emerging paradigms of leadership as studied in women's leadership include collaboration, connectedness, empowerment, and leadership as a process (Biddix, 2010). This is consistent with the current study findings in which all of the participants, identified as women explain their experiences entering the organizations, within the organizations and outcomes and benefits are centered on themes such as community and shared-power that show connectedness, empowerment, and collaboration as values and experiences of students in the organizations. However, not all of the organizations studied were primarily women, indicating a possibility that the increased accessibility of leadership opportunities for women may be influencing the changing paradigm of leadership. As all of the participants indicated that they played a leadership role in their organizations, they may have had a significant influence on the structure of the organization. Future research may consider the influence of the themes of emerging paradigms of leadership is influenced by women in leadership positions on college campuses.

Furthermore, the aversion to what the participants viewed as “traditional student organizations” may be due to the slower shift in leadership paradigms due to prevalence of industrial leadership values. According to Rost, the industrial paradigm is characterized as individualistic, formal and synonymous with management (Biddix, 2010) consistent with the views of the participants who described traditional student organizations as hierarchical and competitive. The current study participants spent some time finding an organization to become involved with, expressed the need to change an organization or begin a new organization to fit their needs to engage in activism and positively change society from their standpoint; but possibly also to fit their needs associated with a comfortable leadership structure for themselves that may be indicative of the postindustrial leadership paradigm “based on shared responsibility, the opportunity to create change, and inclusiveness” (Rost, 1993 as cited in Biddix, 2010).

Overall, in addition to the transformative experiences of becoming a change agent, mobilizing a grassroots organization or idea, contact with people different from them for example there are a few additional outcomes that I noticed through listening to the responses and analyzing the associated themes. Chapter five also describes these findings and includes suggestions on how student affairs practitioners and faculty can support special interest student organizations.

Chapter V: Conclusion

Introduction

This research study investigates the experiences of students who engage in activism in special interest student organizations that are centered on creating political,

social, environmental or economic change. The final chapter of this thesis provides a brief overview of the research interest and the methods used in this study. Furthermore, the last sections of the chapter summarize the results, discuss their implications, and provide recommendations for future research.

Summary

The purpose of the study was to explore student's involvement experiences in a sub-genre of special interest organizations, which include the greatest diversity in student organizations (Dunkel and Schuh, 1998). This study provided an opportunity to look at the experiences of student activist organizations during a time in which community organizing and activism is on an incline. It investigated the experiences of students through the research questions, (a) what are students' experiences in special interest organizations? (b) What do students self-report as a benefit or gain by participating? Sub-questions include: (1) why the students chose to participate in the particular special interest organization, (2) what are some important experiences?

In chapter three I explained that the study was approached from a *Social Constructivist* worldview (Creswell, 2009), acknowledging that individuals seek to make meaning of what they experience. As the goal of the research from a social constructivist worldview is to "rely as much as possible on the participants' views of the situation being studied" (Creswell, 2009, p.8). Research was conducted at a large public university in the Pacific Northwest. The participants were selected using purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2009) in order to obtain participants from a specific type of organization. The study was conducted in Fall of 2009.

Two methods for data collection were used in the study: (a) one-on-one, semi-structured interview and, (b) a focus group. I checked the accuracy of the data collected from the one-on-one interviews by presenting what I had found using a preliminary coding and presenting it to the focus group. Through using this method accuracy of themes were measured.

Utilizing the in vivo coding method once after the one-on-one interview and then again after the focus group I uncovered several themes in the responses that I presented in chapter four. The data collection yielded 10 themes under the headings of the two research questions (a) experiences in the organizations and (b) benefits of involvement. Under the experience heading there are three categories (1) moving-in to the organization, (2) experiences within the organization and (3) outcomes of the organization), which classified the subthemes. (1a) discovering a niche, (1b) Aversion to “traditional” student organizations and (1c) is becoming a change agent. (2a) non-hierarchical organization structure, (2b) grassroots organizing, (2c) Faculty challenge and support, (2d) Peer challenges, (2e)Mentorship and (2f) Community. Community as a theme was a theme that crossed all of the themes. (3a) Community (referred to in the previous section) and (3b) Perseverance. The second theme heading was benefits of involvement which yielded 5 subthemes: (a) Becoming a change agent, (b) Mobility, (c) Community, (d) Diversity, and (e) Career Preparation. Brief summaries of the findings of the two themes are below.

Experiences. Student experiences as members of special interest organizations that engage in activism have been found in this study to be a positive one. Participants found community with others who share their similar interests in making

change. The community assisted them with their own personal and professional development and provided them with a group to do their work. In addition to the sought-after and appreciated support that they received from their peers in the organization, they engaged in activities that challenged their knowledge of groups of people, and that made them better communicators. This research suggests that special interest organizations of this genre are important to students who wish to engage in change and based on the research, are especially important for students who wish to engage in the work after they transition out of college. Finally, for these students, experiences that lead to support and growth were important.

Benefits. Participants in the study reported several benefits of their involvement including the opportunity to build community around a common purpose, the opportunity to increase personal mobility through unique and important experiences, working with people different from themselves, and career preparation. The result of being asked these questions about experiences and benefits also allowed for students to gain another benefit, the time to reflect on their experiences and communicate what it is they acquired through their experiences.

Unexpected Findings. There are two sets of unexpected findings that arose from this study. The first is tied to the themes that arose from the research questions: (a) motivations, and the second comprise two things that I noticed through the lens of a student development professional (b) cognitive development as an outcome and (c) connections between campus activism and larger social movement. The last finding was not solely unexpected; however, I came across this finding outside of my original research question.

Motivations. I was expecting going into the study that students may have some degree of motivation for involving themselves in the organizations that were similar to what I had seen in my experiences. I expected the participants to be somewhat motivated to join an organization because they were seeking certain professional development experiences such as leadership training, general experience or mobility. However, what I found instead was that the participants named each of these things as an outcome for their involvement; however it was in no way a motivation for becoming involved in the organization. In fact, the participants expressed negative feelings towards entering an organization in which there were student's who sought to put experiences on their resume. Furthermore, as I presented this unexpected finding to the focus group, one participant admitted that she felt that leadership experience for instance, was an outcome but not a motivation (Juno). The participant's motivations for involvement were centered on finding a community of people with similar interests around making change and then making sure that being productive in that community was something that was accomplished. The participants reported that they needed to engage in impactful work that was linked to their interest. This finding suggests that there may be a distinct difference, in terms of motivations between what the participants in "traditional" student organizations and the special interest organization sub-category focused on in the current study. The difference in motivation between organizations may be a topic for future research.

Student Development Outcomes. Through analysis from my view as a student development practitioner I saw it through my lens which I believe will be helpful to students and practitioners. In the next section I describe one student development

outcome that emerged: students may have experienced cognitive development as a result of involvement.

Cognitive Development. Another unintended finding that arose, and an opportunity for future research, was the development of critical thinking skills. Participants' reflection on experiences relating the experiences to systemic phenomena showed that the students have exercised or developed critical thinking skills including: application of knowledge to real world concepts, and synthesis of experiences that are linked to larger social schema. For example Gaia discussed her experience working in the [Do it yourself] organization:

“I’ve used a screwdriver-a hammer, a lot of new things I had to learn and in the male environment, a lot of guys have grown up using tools and knowing basic mechanic skills. Personally I’ve not at all, not that it holds true for all guys or all girls, but I would say generally probably in our culture-it is how it pans out”.

As a result of new interactions in a new organization culture, she also had the opportunity to apply basic social systems theory around gendered experiences in society. This again solidifies the development of advanced cognitive development and critical inquiry that is facilitated through extracurricular experiences.

Previous research (Gellin, 2003; Astin, 1984) has shown that extracurricular involvement for undergraduates can increase critical thinking capability for a number of reasons that are linked to development of critical thinking: seeking out groups that in turn lead to a high level of commitment, a sense of belonging, peer interaction with those who share and do not share their views inside organizations in which participants do and don't share a common interest. All of these conditions were met through the expression of the student experience in these organizations.

Much of the previous research on student involvement is concentrated on undergraduate students. Two of the five participants in this study were post baccalaureate students at the time of the study and the remaining three were on the cusp of graduation. However, the current research suggests that these studies may still be legitimately applied to post baccalaureate students. These participants have also mirrored previous research that shows that involvement in an organization by which one can gain a sense of belonging through a common interest will develop critical thinking skills. For example, Gaia's interaction with the homeless population while working at the [bicycle cooperative] helped her to expand her thought process around the expectations of others situations and behaviors which she in turn applied to a lesson in judgment "we all have ideas about [groups of people we are unfamiliar with] but if you haven't actually talked to someone-everybody's different you know different situations . . .". Another area for future research would be to look at how involvement in change oriented organizations influence identity development.

Studies associated with the effects of activities that cultivate citizenship, or what it means to act in a socially responsible matter show that students have an increased development of identity and self authorship (Abes, Jones and McEwen, 2007). Self Authorship is described as "an ability to construct knowledge in a contextual world, an ability to construct an internal identity separate from external influences, and an ability to engage in relationships without losing one's internal identity" (p.5). These students, on a number of occasions showed this in their responses; they were able to identify what they needed in involvement opportunities based on their personal values. The students identified their purpose in creating change on campus and seek opportunities or make

opportunities to engage in those activities. Their values were clearly expressed and additionally they can articulate why, for instance, hierarchical leadership in organizations was not right for them.

Furthermore, increased level of involvement and commitment leads to greater development of critical thinking and identity development. The organizations considered in the research require a high level of involvement as explained by the participants in order to become effective at seeing the mission through. Additionally, this is a required high level involvement in an organization that is grassroots that not only challenges the students to discuss and defend their ideals; make decisions using a consensus model, incorporating the opinions and feelings of many; and encourage the discussion of small issues within large global issues and navigate through different organizations both community and campus organizations. These organizations seem to be effective already at producing developed student leaders, all difficult experiences considered. A level of support may assist in students further developing a sense of self authorship and critical thinking, as professionals could facilitate the process of reflection and challenge them to consider and make decisions about the outcomes of their involvement.

Connection between campus activism and larger social movement. Another unexpected finding was that as participants spoke about their experiences in the organizations they spoke a lot about the nature of activism in general and it seemed to cross over to what their experiences were in the organizations that helped them to make change. They brought up two themes, one is that they not only were motivated to join the organization because they wanted to make change, but in addition a few participants

relayed that motivation back to their general lives, (a) they can't imagine seeing an injustice and not acting. The second is, that the need for (b) continuity and vision is seen as important for making change, this is related to their experience needing to build group consensus and mentor new students to help and sustain their projects.

It occurred to me through my analysis that the nature of the organizations mirrored and overall affected how the students perceived the purpose and nature of their organizations. The larger motivation for change they described mirrored and appeared to affect what motivated them to join their organizations. For example, Juno explained her motivation for participating in activism,

“I can't imagine being angry about something and complaining about it and not doing anything about it. That is a disjuncture for me, those individuals who can't just... ‘That was unjust and sad and now I'm gonna just walk away’. I feel compelled to go help to the point when I shouldn't, probably a little busy should stop that but I need to get involved, I need to help, I need to see something is getting done about this by someone.”

Pomona gave another compelling perspective on meaningful involvement in an organization,

“... I think so many people mistake college for a check box-checking it off your list of things to do. When really it can be this holistic learning experience, you don't need to get done in four years, if you do that's great. But it's just so much more than that. That I think you should take advantage of it, you are developing yourself by going and getting involved in activities, it's not just something to put on your resume, not just something you get paid for”.

These are two examples of the many instances that I heard from the participants in which they need to make change and for it to be meaningful, and how it informed what culture they described as necessary to make change in the world.

In the focus group I brought up a comment about continuity, a common issue for student organizations, and a theme that I heard through their interviews. The participants discussed the issue of recruitment of new members but also of how important it is to mentor new members. What I heard mirrored the feelings around creating and sustaining a movement that they discussed in their interviews making it consistent with this theme. The vision for change and how to sustain it came through. All four focus group members connected the need to focus on the big picture, bring in and mentor new members and finding the balance to sustain their efforts even though they realized that no end to the larger issue was in sight.

Gaia explained,

“I think the nature of activism, it’s resisting, it’s change, and if you’re not willing to think about what that change will look like or make the change, it would be surprising that you would still be in the movement”

Juno described the need to mentor others and keep balanced because participating in the campus organization helps to progress the larger movement.

“It’s balance and then keeping it going too. There’s no way I’m going to solve feminism [related issues]. I really want to insure that someone else is still working on the issue and still advocating for whatever you are advocating for” (Juno).

Gaia explains the importance of solving issues of group dynamics to involve everyone,

“I was thinking about the quote ‘Step up, step back’. . . If you’re not saying a lot, and you haven’t taken the forward step to do it, or you talk all the time, or you’re dominating; to move back and that’s something I think about all the time in group dynamics trying to keep that balance”.

Juno discussed celebrating the little joys that come with being part of an organization to keep motivated to sustain the work towards change. “You aren’t going to see the end of it but . . . there are little joys. I have a couple of mentees that I get to work with . . . those are great people who are going to keep fighting for this. “If you have it in your mind what this issue solved will look like and then just every little victory kind of reinforces what you are doing” (Juno). For Gaia, maintaining a high standard of work because it gives the most insurance that they will be making a difference even if they won’t see any of it.

Another part of continuity and vision is the perception that it is much easier to sustain a change oriented organization if there is a “concrete benefit”. For Artemis, she explained that it may be easier to promote the message of an organization that has a tangible aspect to it such as a food pantry or a bike cooperative. Gaia explained, ““This is food, I’m gonna eat it’, ‘this is a bike, I’m gonna ride it’, and that makes it a little easier and being open and having a physical space, all those things it really makes a big difference in terms of just a pure organizing group when you’ve got an issue you’re trying to promote or do something about.” Furthermore, there is a discussion of permanence that is contingent on support both inside and outside the university for the

food bank and from funding and for Gaia, she was concerned about keeping the mission intact and making sure there is a five year plan and strategy. Artemis showed a need to produce something because that is what people support, for Artemis it was a conference promoting ideals of environmentalism and feminism.

The result of this finding can lead to implications for practice. Students who connect their experiences in campus activism to larger social movements and see their roles as local entities for a global cause are unique. Practitioners can listen to the voice of the student activist and help to empower them and their groups and provide support through any issues that arise. In the next section, I will suggest implications for practice.

Implications for Practice

This study is not generalizable due to the limited participants, diversity of participants, length of study and methodology; however it can assist practitioners with initiating practices to help support and develop student activists on campus. Research on college students has over the past few decades have focused on the student transition into college (Upcraft, M.L., Gardener, J.N. & Barefoot, B.O, 2005). Researchers have found that they have unique obstacles, motivations, outcomes and experiences concerning student involvement and agree that it is important to find ways to develop effective students. However, development for students out of college is less prevalent; it is easy to see through the current research that there is a parallel need specifically in these cases to develop socially conscious and action oriented students with the same dedication. Due to the age of the participants looking especially salient to their experiences, I would suggest that those who work with student activist that wish to pursue activism long term,

should seek to assist these students to provide them mentorship and skill development that will allow them to achieve their goals. In an ever changing world that is grounded in the knowledge and actions of its citizens, universities could do a lot more to support and help develop through the efforts assist in the transition from student activist to active citizen.

Based on the overall findings I also suggest ways in which student affairs practitioners and faculty can provide institutional support to assist students who are in organizations on campus to make change including (a) helping with skill development and (b) social mobility, (c) recognition and nurturance of the capability to make change on and off campus through student affairs and academic faculty partnerships.

Institutional Support for Student Activists. Some of these participants had bad experiences and a general fear of the University and so lending support to them up front if they show the interest in making change on or off campus. If we do this we can avoid comments such as: “They [the University] do have the power to squash you like a bug if they decided to but usually they don’t want to. Unless you are really doing something that is against their interests” (Juno). This could be difficult to overcome, and past research suggests that at this particular institution, they are not alone; one study of the relationship between activists and campus administrators described that, “that interaction and communication between students and administration was often problematic (Altbach & Cohen, 1990; Rhoads, 1998a, 1998b as cited in Ropers-Huilman, Carwile & Barnett, 2005). In my research I did not find research or literature that indicated faculty support for an approach to student affairs that guides students through the change making process. The participants all understood that for their situations it was more difficult to

find support from faculty because they have a heavy work load of teaching and research and felt that they didn't have time to get to know students. This research suggests that this may be a trait of a large research university that undergraduates largely experience. The participants in post baccalaureate programs that are smaller and Gaia who was at an undergraduate program at a smaller college both received more support from the faculty when they showed an interest in creating social change. I would suggest based on this research that students who wish to make social change need institutional support and needs to be approachable and widely marketed and promoted in the classroom as well as in student organizations making it more approachable. It is my opinion based on this research that students need more than skill training, they need to learn how to mobilize themselves effectively. The importance of this is evident and related to research on student involvement and retention. Students that have involvement with the faculty and experience applying their knowledge in the classroom, for example their knowledge of social problems, they are more engaged and more successful (Astin, 1984; Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005). Artemis painted a picture of what this may start to look like,

“I wish that a professor who saw that I had passion for these issues through my writing would have said, you know, just a word of encouragement of actually like moving that into praxis at the university . . . I never received that and I don't know why, I think that faculty should be offering feedback, affirmation, that like, this is great work, do something about it on campus, we need you to do something, you can do it!” Another element of our proposed support mechanism for student activists is to partner students with mentors who are upper-class or post baccalaureate students who are doing similar work to help and guide them.

In noting that we can run into the obstacle of possibly providing more support than necessary, Sanford (1968) discusses the need to provide enough challenge as well as

support to students to develop a disequilibrium that elicits growth. Faculty efforts to assist teach and assist students to become activists, discussed in the Chronicle of Higher Education article in the Literature review shows that these efforts may already be occurring, however, it was clear in that situation that students either did not understand the actions, possibly due to developmental restraints, or because they are not engaging in the work in the proper way and could benefit from increased knowledge about motivating student activists or looking at outcomes to involvement. In either case we know that students new to college do not necessarily commit to an organization or activity as students who formally become involved in student organizations in the first year are quite the minority, about 20% of students report attending a meeting of a campus club, organization or student government group very often; another 15% report attending often (Upcraft, M.L., Gardener, J.N. & Barefoot, B.O, 2005, p. 96). Because of this fact and due to the participants who elected to participate in my study it may be helpful to educate students early on impacts of student activism but allow for the assistance to help create action for students who show an interest in making change or for those who are transitioning out of school. A focus on the transition out of school provides a forum to educate about being a part of the larger community, becoming a socially responsible citizen and ways to make change locally while thinking globally that could be easier for students to grasp.

In addition, I think that lending support to student activists or potential student activists requires that students are given assistance on how to navigate through laws, rules and regulations on and off campus. I believe that the fear of being an administrator on a college campus is that students will question campus authority or cause a disruption. If

students are cared for in a way that allows them to navigate through a change process with the assistance of an administrator they will be much more successful in their goals and have a better relationship with faculty on campus.

Assumptions and Limitations. Due to the timeframe for this project to be undertaken and completed,, the study can be in no way generalizable. Participants were only selected from a single university and were all women. Having a less homogenous sample of student activists would perhaps change the nature of the student experience is another limitation. Another limitation is the fact that the participants were all older than average students finishing their baccalaureate degrees or engaging in post baccalaureate work and may not have the same experiences as “traditional” age undergraduates. In addition, limited demographic information was collected so there is no way of knowing if race, ethnicity or socioeconomic status came into play with the student experiences.

Recommendations for Future Research

The current research sought to investigate the experiences of student activists in special interest organizations. The study could be expanded in a number of different ways. I would suggest that studies such as this be duplicated to look at a variety of experiences of student activists on campus as my participant sample was rather homogenous. For example, it may be interesting and salient to look at student activists who engage in activism that is centered on their ascribed identity status. For instance, I would look at if the experience would change if a student is acting on behalf of their ethnic group, in an activist capacity. For instance, MEChA an organization founded on the principles of self-determination for the liberation of the Chicano people, this organization believes in political action for change and represents the needs of the

Chicano people (www.nationalmecha.org). In the future, I would be interested in engaging in research surrounding student activists that concentrate on other areas of social justice, with different personal and political affiliations.

Finally, there is clearly a sociopolitical identity developed in the current study and an observation of a level of cognitive development that arose from a small study of the experiences of student activist in student special interest organizations. However, an in depth study of student development from the view of their identity as an activist may yield interesting data that would lead practitioners to know how to assist students in becoming action oriented and community conscious.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to investigate how the student participants viewed their experiences in special interest organizations that are centered on creating social change, the benefits of their involvement. Through the research I discovered that the participants' motivation to engage in their organizations was a thoughtful process; a process in which their age and experience seemed to play a role. All of the students in the study were in a stage in their life when they had significant experiences leading them to want to engage in an activity that would be meaningful and produce change. The students had significant experiences creating or continually building upon grassroots organizations. They encountered hardships communicating their message and needs to faculty and peers which influenced their ability to mobilize their cause. All the participants' responses to the research questions suggested to me that the students felt that their experience relating to the structure and function of the organizations was unique. In addition, their approach to leadership within the organization as well as their

motivation to create change through a consensus driven organization shows a shift into post industrial leadership styles. This is consistent with the research that students have a capacity for socially responsible leadership, as the culture of creating change is abundant in modern American life. It is my hope that university faculty both from student affairs and academic affairs will take a look at how to support these students through the process of creating change, and that others continue research on the unique experiences of student activists in special interest student organizations.

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Appendix A: IRB Approval Documents



Institutional Review Board - Office of Sponsored Programs and Research Compliance
Oregon State University, 312 Kerr Administration Building, Corvallis, Oregon 97331-2140
Tel 541-737-4933 | Fax 541-737-3093 | <http://oregonstate.edu/research/ospro/ro/humansubjects.htm>
IRB@oregonstate.edu

NOTIFICATION OF APPROVAL

Date: September 29, 2009

Principal Investigator: Tom Scheuermann, Adult Higher Education
Study Team Members: Heather Nicole Saladino, Student Researcher

Study Number and Title: 4425 - Student Involvement in Special Interest Organizations

Sponsor: None

Review Category: Expedited Category Number: 6 and 7

Approval Date: 09/25/09 Expiration Date: 09/24/10

Approved Number of Participants: 10

The above referenced project was reviewed and approved by the Oregon State University's Institutional Review Board (IRB).

The IRB has approved the: Initial Application

As principal investigator of the research, you are responsible for fulfilling the following requirements of approval:

- 1) All study team members should be kept informed of the status of the research.
- 2) Any changes to the research must be submitted to the IRB for review and approval prior to the activation of the changes.
- 3) Reports of unanticipated problems involving risks to participants or others must be submitted to the IRB within three calendar days.
- 4) Only consent forms with a valid approval stamp may be presented to participants.
- 5) Submit a continuing review application or final report to the IRB for review at least four weeks prior to the expiration date. Failure to submit a continuing review application prior to the expiration date will result in termination of the research, discontinuation of enrolled participants, and the submission of a new application to the IRB.

If you have any questions, please contact the IRB Office at IRB@oregonstate.edu or by phone at (541) 737-8008.



ADULT EDUCATION AND HIGHER EDUCATION LEADERSHIP
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INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

Project Title: **Student Involvement in Special Interest Student Organizations**
Principle Investigator: **Tom Scheuermann, Adult Higher Education Faculty**
Co-Investigators(s): **Heather Nicole Saladino, Graduate Student in College Student Services Administration**

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY?

You are invited to participate in a research study whose purpose is to investigate the experiences and benefits of students who are actively involved with special interest student organizations that are themed around social, political, economic and environmental change and participate in activism. The results of this study will be used to write a Master thesis in partial completion of a Master of Science (M.S.) degree in College Student Services Administration at Oregon State University.

We are studying this topic because we want to understand the impact of extracurricular involvement for college students, specifically for those students who engage in activities surrounding their interest in change and helping to create change on their campus and community. Student involvement has been shown to be a vital part of student life and by participating in this study you will be helping us to understand how to improve the experiences for students who have similar interests and involvement on college campuses.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS FORM?

This consent form gives you the information you will need to help you decide whether to participate in this study. Please read this form carefully. You may ask any questions about the research, including the possible risks and benefits, your rights as a volunteer, and anything else that is not clear. When all of your questions have been answered, you can decide if you want to be in this study.

WHY AM I BEING INVITED TO TAKE PART IN THIS STUDY?

You are being invited to take part in this study because you have indicated that you are a student at Oregon State University, are at least 18 years of age and have had a high level of involvement with a special interest student organization and engage in activism centered on social, political, economic or environmental change. Furthermore, you have been involved in this organization for at least one academic year and are willing to share your experiences as a student and one who is actively engaged in an organization.



ADULT EDUCATION AND HIGHER EDUCATION LEADERSHIP
 Oregon State University, 402 Education Hall, Corvallis, Oregon 97331
 Tel 541-737-4661 | Fax 541-737-8971 | soewebite@lists.orst.edu/

WHAT WILL HAPPEN DURING THIS STUDY AND HOW LONG WILL IT TAKE?

This study asks that you participate in a one-on-one interview with the researcher to discuss your experiences on the topic previously discussed followed by a focus group to discuss the findings of the study to receive your feedback. All of the participants of the study will be included in the focus group (up to 10 study participants). Comments made in the interview may be discussed in the focus group with all study participants.

If you agree to participate in this study, your estimated time commitment is no more than 4 hours over the course of the Fall 2009 quarter. No more than 2 hours for the first interview and no more than 2 hours for the focus group. The one-on-one interview will be scheduled during the first few weeks of the quarter and the focus group shortly after, within the middle to late weeks of the quarter.

WHAT ARE THE RISKS OF THE STUDY?

There are minimal risks involved in this study. You will be able to decline to answer any question without justification, and the researcher will avoid asking you to speak about deeply personal topics that you do not wish to address.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF THE STUDY?

We do not know if you will benefit from this study. However, we hope that the information that we gain will help to benefit students in the future data from the project will aid student affairs professionals/advisors in understanding how to best serve students who engage in these or similar activities. We also hope that you have a good time talking about and reflecting upon your experiences.

WILL I BE PAID FOR PARTICIPATING?

You will not be paid for or compensated in any way for being in this study.

WHO WILL SEE THE INFORMATION I GIVE?

The information you provide during the research study will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by the law and university policy. Information that you provided will be shared with other participants during the focus group. The researcher can and will advise all participants to maintain confidentiality about information shared, but this cannot be guaranteed. Therefore, confidentiality cannot be guaranteed. To help protect confidentiality outside of the group of study participants, we will store all collected information in a confidential and locked location. You will be assigned an identification code that will be used on all data forms in order to secure your privacy. If the results of this project are published, your identity will not be made public.



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AUDIO RECORDING

This study requires that you are audio recorded in both the interview and the focus group. These recordings will be transcribed by a professional, confidential, transcription service. This will allow the researcher to revisit, review, and analyze information discussed during the course of the interview. Only the researcher and the transcription service will have access to the recording and transcriptions. Furthermore, all recordings will be destroyed upon completion of the research study or after a period of no more than five years from the completion of this study.

DO I HAVE A CHOICE TO BE IN THE STUDY?

If you decide to take part in the study, it should be because you want to volunteer. You will not lose any benefits or rights you would normally have before volunteering. If you decide not to take part in this study, your decision will have no effect on the quality of care and services you receive.

You will not be treated differently if you decide to stop taking part in this study. You may elect to pass or decline to answer any question posed during the interview or focus group. If you choose to withdraw from this project before it ends, the researchers may keep information collected about you and this information may be included in study reports in a manner that doesn't personally identify you.

WHAT IF I HAVE QUESTIONS?

If you have questions about this research project, please contact: Tom Scheuermann at (541)737-5622 or tom.scheuermann@oregonstate.edu or Heather Nicole Saladino at (541)737-3175 or heathemicole.christian@oregonstate.edu.

If you have questions about your rights as a participant, please contact the Oregon State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) Human Protections Administrator, at (541)737-8008 or IRB@oregonstate.edu.

Your signature indicates that this research study has been explained to you, that your questions have been answered, and that you agree to take part in this study. You will receive a copy of this form.

Participants Name (printed):

(Signature of Participant)

(Date)

Oregon State University • IRB Study #:4425 Approval Date: 09/25/09 Expiration Date: 09/24/10

Appendix B: Recruitment Materials

Recruitment Email

Seeking OSU Student Organization Members and Activists to participate in research project
[Christian, Heather Nicole](#)

Sent: Wednesday, October 21, 2009 5:15 PM

To: Christian, Heather Nicole

Hello student organization leaders!

My name is Heather Nicole Saladino, I am graduate student in the College Student Services Administration program in the College of Education. I am currently seeking up to 10 students to participate in a study that I am doing around college student activists whose work is centered around political, social, economic or environmental change. I would love if you as organization leaders would pass this letter onto your members, and if you fit the description and are interested, I would appreciate your involvement as well. If you have any questions or would like any additional information please feel free to contact me, Heather Nicole Saladino, at heathernicole.christian@oregonstate.edu. Have a great day!

Sincerely,

Heather Nicole Saladino
 Graduate Student Researcher

(Recruitment Letter)

Dear Students:

My name is Heather Nicole Saladino and I am a graduate student in the College of Education. In order to complete my course of study I am conducting a study on the experiences of students in special interest student organizations who participate in activism. I invite you to participate in my study. The study would ask that you participate in a one-on-one interview during the next few weeks of the Fall 2009 term as well as a follow up focus group. Your participation would be greatly appreciated! Qualifications to participate in this study include:

- Must be at least 18 years of age.
- Have a high level of involvement as you define it, in a special interest organization that is concerned with *political, social, economic or environmental change*. And have also been involved with that organization for at least one academic year.
- Participate in at least one if not regular activism projects including but not limited to: letter writing, protests, economic activism, rallies, blogging or strikes for issues associated with the organization.

If you meet the qualifications for participating in this study, and wish to do so, please email me at heathernicole.christian@oregonstate.edu by Friday, October 23rd. I look forward to hearing from you and appreciate your consideration of this request!

Appendix C: Research Protocol

The following is the research protocol approved by the IRB (see Appendix A) on September 25th, 2009.

1. Brief Description

This research project, titled Student Involvement in Special Interest Organizations, is designed to fulfill the requirements of a Master of Science thesis in College Student Services Administration at Oregon State University. This study will address the following research questions: (1) what are the student's experiences in special interest student organizations that focus on political, social, economic and environmental change? (2) What do students report as a benefit of their participation?

The study will take the form of a qualitative study in which interviews will be conducted with up to 10 students who have a high level of involvement in a special interest student organization that focus on political, social, economic and environmental change and participate in activism in the community and around campus. The participants are required to be at least sophomore standing and have been involved with their organization for at least one academic year in order to yield more data, as the participants will have had ample time to explore their involvement. Interviews will explore participants' experiences, benefits of involvement, and reasons why they chose to participate in said organization.

The results of this study will be used in writing a Master's thesis, and may also be used in preparing conference proposals and presentations, as well as article(s) for submission to professional journal(s).

2. Background and Significance

My thesis research, titled Student Involvement in Special Interest Organizations, is a study focusing on the outcomes and benefits of student involvement from the student perspective. Through one on one interview with students, I will have the ability to acquire information about the student experiences and through careful analysis of those interviews, identify common themes among the student response. I believe that this information will be helpful in informing practices in student affairs, specifically for those who engage in advising organizations whose participants chose to engage in the political, social, economic and environmental change process. As college is a time of great personal and professional development for students, it will be of great assistance to those who assist in their growth during these experiences that may challenge them. Furthermore, this completed research may inspire further scholarship for student leadership practitioners who advise and advocate for students who become involved with a special interest student organization. My career in the field of student affairs thrives on

the ability to read current research, and through my thesis, conduct my own research on student involvement experiences that inform how I practice in the field.

3. Methods and Procedures

Following IRB approval, the researcher will email advisors or leaders of special interest organizations, selected by the researcher as those that meet the qualifications of the study. The researcher will request that the leaders or advisors forward a recruitment email to students in their organizations. This email will include a brief explanation and description of the study and request their participation (please see Attachment A). If the student self identifies as a meeting the qualifications and wish to participate in the study, they would then contact the researcher.

Once the participants have initiated contact with the researcher via email or phone, an interview will be scheduled to take place in a private location chosen in consultation with each participant. Prior to the interview, each participant will receive a copy of the “Informed Consent” document and interview questions for their review via email (please see Attachment B). On the day of the interview, information in the consent form will be reviewed and questions will be answered. Participants will be required to sign the “Informed Consent” document prior to the beginning of the interview. A copy of the signed agreement will be provided to the participant.

Interviews will be semi-structured, consisting of both open-ended and closed-ended questions. While a set of interview questions has been developed (please see Attachment C), additional questions and topics may emerge during the interviews. However, only topics that relate specifically to the research questions of this study will be discussed. Additional questions will be of the same depth and related to the content of the questions attached. Interview and survey questions will be piloted prior to the interview and changes to the questions made be made for clarity.

Interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed by a professional, confidential transcription service. Audio recording is not optional for this study. All while collecting information from participants (either via recording and/or note taking) no identifying information about the participant will be used. The participant will only be referenced during this study through their assigned personal identification code. All recordings and transcripts will be stored in a locked location in the researcher’s on campus office to which only she has access. Audio-recordings will be in digital format and stored with password protection on a private computer (all original recordings will be erased immediately after being uploaded to the researcher’s private computer). A copy of the audio recordings and transcriptions will be burned to a CD and stored in a locked filing cabinet in the Principle Investigator’s campus office.

Upon completion of all the first set of one-on-one interviews, the researcher will analyze the data for themes and create a set of follow up questions for a focus group. The focus group will involve all of the participants (up to 10). The purpose of the focus group is to present preliminary findings to the group and ask any additional follow up questions that will or will not solidify the themes found across the first set of interviews. The focus

group will provide a conclusion to the study for the participants by allowing them to reflect with one another on the themes, while providing additional data for the study and clearing up any confusion from the previous interviews.

Students will be informed that information that they provided will be shared with other participants during the focus group. The researcher can and will advise all participants to maintain confidential about information shared, but this cannot be guaranteed. The focus group will also be audio-recorded and transcribed by a professional, confidential transcription service.

The same storage protocol as outlined above will be followed. All recordings, transcripts, surveys, and notes will be kept for up to three years after termination of the study (to allow for data to be used in other scholarship such as a professional journal article, conference presentation, etc.).

The estimated time commitment for each participant approximately 4 hours over the course of the Fall 2009 quarter. No more than 2 hours for the first one-on-one interview and no more than 2 hours for the focus group are expected. The one-on-one interview will be scheduled during the first half of the Fall 2009 quarter and the focus group will occur mid to late Fall 2009 quarter.

4. Risks/Benefit Assessment

- **Risks** – There are minimal risks to the participants involved in this study. The possible risks and/or discomforts associated with the procedures described in the study include possible discomfort in identifying, exploring, and describing experiences within their organizations. Participants will be able to decline to answer any question without justification, and strong effort will be made to avoid deeply personal topics.
- **Benefits** – There are minimal direct benefits. However, the researcher hopes participants will view the opportunity to speak about and reflect upon their college experiences positively, and find it helpful in understanding how their experiences have impacted them. Furthermore, the researcher believes that the data from the project will aid student affairs professionals/advisors in understanding how to best serve students who engage in these or similar activities.
- **Conclusion** – The risk to the participants is minimal. The benefits to participants are minimal.

5. Participant Population

Each participant must be an active member/participant in an identified special interest student organization and participates in social or political activism. The participants are required to be at least sophomore standing and have been involved with their organization for at least one academic year. [REDACTED] All participants will be 18 years of age or older.

6. Subject Identification and Recruitment

It is the researcher's intention to select up to 10 students that meet the above criteria to participate in the study. An email briefly describing the study and outlining both the expectations to the participants will be forwarded to students who may be

interested in the study by advisors and leadership of the identified special interest organizations (please see Attachment A for recruitment material). Students interested in the study will initiate contact with the researcher via email or phone and an interview will be scheduled. Eligible participants will be selected on a first-come-first-serve basis. If the researcher is unable to identify at least 4 participants for the study, the researcher will provide her own contact information to the recruited participants to pass onto others who may be interested. Additionally, the researcher may choose to schedule a time to speak at identified organization meetings to present the recruitment materials. In all recruitment mediums listed above, the potential participants will never be asked to provide contact information before they have contacted the researcher.

7. Compensation

Participants will not be monetarily compensated.

8. Informed Consent Process

The researcher will send a letter via email explaining the research and the informed consent process to each participant along with a copy of the “Informed Consent” document (please see Attachment B for informed consent information). The “Informed Consent” document will be reviewed and signed at the beginning of the interview and a copy will be provided for the participants.

9. Anonymity Confidentiality

The interview and the focus group will be conducted in a safe, private location determined in conjunction with the participant. Students will be informed that information that they provided will be shared with other participants during the focus group. The researcher can and will advise all participants to maintain confidential about information shared, but this cannot be guaranteed.

The audio recording of the interviews will not include the participant’s name, address, or any other identifying information. Audio recordings will be transcribed by a professional, confidential transcription service. All recordings, transcriptions, and notes will be stored in a locked location in the researcher’s on campus office to which only she has access. All electronic materials (i.e. identification key code, audio recordings, and transcriptions) will be password protected on the researcher’s private computer. A copy of the key code, audio recordings, transcriptions, and notes will be burned to a CD and stored in a locked filing cabinet in the Principle Investigator’s campus office. All surveys, recordings, transcripts, and notes will be destroyed (deleted permanently from the researcher’s private computer, and all paper and burned electronic information will be shredded using a confidential shredding service) will be kept in a locked or password protected location for a minimum of three years after the study is terminated.

10. Attachments

- Recruitment Materials (Attachment A)
- Informed Consent Information (Attachment B)
- List of Semi structured Interview Questions for Interview 1 (Attachment C)

Attachment A-Recruitment Materials

To: Special Interest Student Organization Members
Subject: Participate in Research on Student Organizations

Dear student organization members:

My name is Heather Nicole Saladino and I am a graduate student in the College of Education. In order to complete my course of study I am conducting a study on the experiences of students in special interest student organizations who participate in activism. I invite you to participate in my study. The study would ask that you participate in a one-on-one interview during the next few weeks of the Fall 2009 term as well as a follow up focus group. You're participation would be greatly appreciated! Qualifications to participate in this study include:

- Must be at least 18 years of age.
- Have a high level of involvement as you define it, in a special interest organization that is concerned with political, social, economic or environmental change. And have also been involved with that organization for at least one academic year.
- Participate in at least one if not regular activism projects including but not limited to: letter writing, protests, economic activism, rallies, blogging or strikes for issues associated with the organization.

If you meet the qualifications for participating in this study, and wish to do so, please email me at heathernicole.christian@oregonstate.edu. I look forward to hearing from you and appreciate your consideration of this request!

Sincerely,

Heather Nicole Saladino
Graduate Student Researcher
College of Education

Attachment B: Informed Consent Documents
(See Attached File)

Attachment C: List of Semi-structured interview questions for Interview 1

1. Why did you choose to join this organization?
 - a. How did you become involved in the organization?
 - b. What was the appeal of this organization over others?
2. Explain to me your experience in _____ organization.
 - a. How have you been involved in the organization over the past year?
 - b. What is your level of involvement, how much time do you spend participating?
 - c. Do you hold a leadership position?
3. What are some important experiences have you had in this organization?
 - a. Moments of challenge?
 - b. Moments where you felt supported?
4. What do you perceive as the benefits of being involved in this organization?
5. What have you gained through your experiences?
6. What would you tell a student who was thinking about joining your organization?
7. Do you have any other comments about your involvement?

(Any follow up questions)