

# Levels of Engagement Matter: The Role of Student Organizations in Developing Students

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## ABSTRACT

*Level of engagement depends on individuals' consideration or choice of activities that are worth devoting their time as well as investing themselves to. The purpose of this study is to examine the development of students based on their level of engagement in student organization. A survey that was designed around Derek Bok's core competencies was distributed to a sample of five hundred and forty university students. Responses were analyzed to determine the differences in the development of student when comparing their level of engagement in student organizations. The findings suggest that level of engagement showed non-statistically significant difference in the development of students. However, the difference in mean scores might suggest that students tend to develop more skills when they are highly engaged in student organizations. As students participate longer, they tend to improve on those skills. Future studies are recommended to investigate the reasons for the non-statistically significant differences through interviews, case studies etc.*

## KEYWORDS

Students, Level of Engagement, Core Competencies, Student Organizations

## INTRODUCTION

Researchers suggest that involvement in student organizations contributes to the development of skills (Kuk & Banning, 2010; Harper & Quayle, 2007; Huang & Chang, 2004). At many

colleges and universities, it is not a requirement to participate in a student organization. However, college and university students are well-served and gain leadership experience as well as other skills through opportunities beyond the formal college classroom (Patterson, 2012). Students can enhance their education well-being by developing knowledge, skills, and competencies through engagement in some of the extra-curricular activities on campus such as participation in student organizations. Involvement has long been studied as a major contributor to the development of college students. However, there is more to learn about student organizations and their impact on student development. Previous studies on student involvement and/or participation suggested that involvement in out-of-class activities has been shown to be an important factor in the development of students (Cox, Krueger, & Murphy, 1998). Employers are looking for students who have knowledge, skills and competencies to work in organizations (Bok, 2006).

Colleges and universities should continually study outcomes of being involved in student organizations because these types of organizations serve as social opportunities for students to engage in campus life at colleges or universities (Kuk & Banning, 2010). Student involvement promotes degree attainment. Continual engagement and networking can stimulate students to negotiate their college experiences successfully (Simmons, 2013). Interaction between students are beneficial and student organizations provide an opportunity for students to meet one

another, form close relationships and gain a better understanding of the type of relationships they develop (Bryant, 2007). Student organizations serving as a gateway can enable students to grow more competent, interdependent, purposeful, and congruent. Incorporating Bok's framework in this study provides an opportunity to assess student development in eight (8) areas. Bok's framework accentuates the major competency areas including learning to communicate effectively; the ability to think critically; building character; preparing for citizenship; living with diversity; preparing for a global society; acquiring broader interests; preparing for a career and vocational development (Bok, 2006).

#### REVIEW OF CORE COMPETENCIES

Competencies refer to an individual's ability to possess a required knowledge or skill. Often, competencies are demonstrated in a student's ability to express their ideas in a clearly and concise manner both orally and in writing. Students should be effective readers and listeners and be able to develop and interpret graphical imageries of objects (Terry, Harb, Hecker, & Wilding, 2002). Some institutions and locations are presently supporting framework of skills and competencies and the determinations to describe these skills have been an on-going process (Jones & Voorhees, 2002). Bok's (2006) framework of core competencies has been useful in identifying crucial competencies that are developed among college and university students as a crucial tool for personal development and to participate actively and effectively in workplaces. Overall, Jones and Voorhees (2002) asserted that "the competency-based initiatives seek to ensure that students attain specific skills, knowledge, and abilities important with respect to whatever they are studying or the transitions for which they are preparing" (p.9). Ruan, Edginton, Chin and Mok

(2011a) used Bok's framework to examine the changes in college and/or university students in core competencies from entry to exit in the Camp Adventure™ Child and Youth Services (CACYS). She specifically tied this framework in her study comparing and contrasting participants' responses at ten (10) staff development sites operated by CACYS. Gassman, Reed & Widner (2014) used nonprofit core competencies to examine how student association activities contribute to leadership development of students in nonprofit management and leadership. Bok's framework was found to be one of the most comprehensive. These eight competencies will be further reviewed in the following paragraphs including definitions and relevant supporting literature.

1. **Communication:** It is a process of conveying messages, sharing ideas and thoughts and having conversation on issues that involves two or more persons (Bok, 2006). Communication comprises of an amount of settings and a standard. The settings involve at least two individuals and also the communication must convey a message. The medium is usually language though there are other possibilities by which communication can be effective and based on skills and knowledge; communication can probably be arranged in a way that there is an expectation of true understanding (Rasmussen, 2001). When communicating with someone, we are actively engaged in making a better understanding what the other person is saying (Dimpleby & Burton, 1992). Such skills may be the most difficult to teach in a traditional classroom. However, student organizations may provide assistance with the curriculum around communication (Bush & Miller, 2011).

2. **Critical Thinking:** For several years, one of the major objectives of education specifically at college level is to foster students' ability to think critically and being able to judge effectively in decision-making. Bok (2006) noted that "the ability to think critically- to ask pertinent questions, recognize and define problems, and arrive at the end at carefully reasoned judgments – is the means of making effective use of information for any purposes" (p.109). Critical thinking is a procedure reflecting on students' thoughts, actions, and choices through their service learning experiences. Service learning experiences serves as a means by which students can improve their communication skills and as well enhance their ability to think critically (Sedlak, Doheny, Panthofer, & Anaya, 2003). However, for college students to successfully adapt to a changing world, they require the ability to think critically, and to produce a large quantity of relevant information (McMillian, 1987).
3. **Character Development:** Character development can be considered as a component of moral development whereby "students demonstrate mature moral development by showing a willingness and capacity to strive for a balance between needs of the self and other's need" (Solomon, Watson, Battistich, Schaps & Delucchi, 1990; Solomon, 1997, p.38). A definition of good character should include development of ethical behavior and moral responsibilities, huge volume for discipline, and goals and standards of personal character and ideas (Huitt, 2004). Bok (2006) noted that the relevance of strengthening the will to act morally is by avoiding violation of one's standards of behavior and also disapproval of people whose good opinion matter. Moreover, Astin and Antonio (2004) reported that the university experiences that were discovered to be crucial and important for character development include being acquainted with interdisciplinary courses and ethnic studies, being involved in religious activities and services, mingling with students from diverse backgrounds and participating in leadership programs and services.
4. **Citizenship:** The history and objective of higher education in America has a custom of preparing students for civic roles and responsibilities. Students need to be adequately prepared for citizenship because they will have a greater influence on the outcome since they are better informed than those with less education (Bok, 2006). Citizenship development involves socializing with students or peers from different race or ethnicity which impact both students' involvement and empowerment in their college. (Sax, 2004). In addition, the development of citizenship can also be improved by attending race or cultural awareness seminars (Sax, 2004). Bok (2006) opined that citizens are developed not because it is one of the oldest educational goals but it is one of great importance for educators.
5. **Diversity:** Many colleges and universities have come to the realization that diversity is an educational policy that has general objectives of equipping graduates with the necessary skills, knowledge and competencies that are relevant in complex and diverse settings (Hurtado, 2001). Bok (2006) explained that society has a lot to gain from having students from diverse backgrounds learn to live, work and learn how to get along with one another in colleges and university. Employers are more interested in college graduates who can

work together with a diverse group of employees and client in complex setting. Student organizations has provided participants the opportunities to interact with people with different ethnic background and because of this, they acquired the skill of working cooperatively in a diverse setting (Harper & Quaye, 2007).

**6. Global Understanding:** Participation in programs such as study abroad and student teach overseas are considered as vital components to the development of global understanding in college students. Furthermore, students gain substantive knowledge and understand the dimensions of a global perspective and development of interpersonal relationships through conversation with one another (Wilson, 1993). It is the responsibility of colleges and university to remove ignorance in students and adequately prepare students for lives increasingly affected by actions beyond our borders. Employers are looking for individuals who have awareness of global issues and implications accompanied by such awareness is highly prioritized (Bok, 2006). For this reason, studies highlight the relevance of equipping students with essential skills, knowledge and competencies, but also to gain experience of applying those knowledge and skills in real-world setting (Hart, 2006).

**7. Widening of Interests:** Bok (2006) noted that colleges and universities have created opportunities for students to choose electives in their program of study so as to explore interests in intriguing subjects. He further explained that broadening of knowledge and awakening of interests are part of student education's principled aspirations. Students have perspective about labor market than their colleagues

with no or less exposure to postsecondary education (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Student organizations in colleges create opportunity for students to share their similar or different professional interests thereby creating a greater chance for students to make accurate decisions.

**8. Career and Vocational Development:**

Evidence have proved that career development courses can significantly heighten the dimensions of student maturity. In addition, today's college and university students tend to have high levels of workplace enthusiasm compared to those with less exposure to college (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Through participation, students will have the abilities to identify the required skills needed for their desired job that will also serve as a platform for career development. Vocational training tends to help students to think about their career broadly because in workplaces, employers expect individuals they have sense of responsibilities in managing their careers and developing the skills they need for progression (Bok, 2006). In addition, field experiences is a major contributor to the development of vocational competencies in students.

**LEVEL OF ENGAGEMENT**

Students with a greater levels of engagement in student organizations recounted more heights of development in the parts of creating and expounding purpose, academic involvement, planning of career, and life management (Foubert & Grainger, 2006). The degree to which students can attain particular developmental goals is a direct purpose of dedicating to activities intended to provide educational benefits. The more students spend time in these activities, the more knowledge they gain and the more skills they develop (Astin, 1984). According to Gassman et al. (2014) on how student association activities

contribute to leadership development of students, it was observed that number of semesters a student participate impacts the development of core competencies. Therefore, participation in student organizations for more than one semester might enhance the development of competencies. Participation in the student organization is helpful in developing employability skill each semester a student participates and students need to be aware of this finding. However, this finding can also be used as a recruitment tool for student organization (Gassman, 2015). Astin (1984) opined that different students show different notches of involvement for different reasons in a given setting. Students who choose to participate in the student organizations for several semesters can consider a taking leadership role or be a member seeking to acquire the skills needed to reach their goals successfully. In addition, Gassman et al. (2014) asserted that “students involved for five or more semesters are likely to continue to move into higher leadership positions, therefore the position they hold and subsequently the skills and abilities they are gaining from that position may contribute to their overall development” (p.109).

## METHODS

The study uses a descriptive and non-parametric research design. Research participants completed a self-reported instrument designed around the core competencies outlined by Derek Bok (2006). This will measure the development of core competencies among participants. Demographic information was collected for each participant through a researcher designed questionnaire. The participants in this study are students above 18 years old who have graduated from a comprehensive Midwestern university. Kruskal-Wallis test (nonparametric procedure) was used to determine if students’ level of engagement helps in the development of students. The

Kruskal-Wallis statistical test was used to evaluate differences between three or more groups using data from an independent-measures design. However, this statistical procedure only provides the overall outcomes but does not allow for comparison between groups. The most commonly used follow-up test or can also be called after-fact test for the Kruskal-Wallis is the Mann-Whitney U post hoc test (Gravetter & Wallnau, 2004). Performing the Kruskal-Wallis test, the number of semesters question options was recoded and combined to create three groupings in each of the following categories: short term engagement (1-2 semesters), moderate engagement (3-4 semesters.), and long term engagement (5+ semesters). This type of combination will allow comparison of differences by first year, second year, and third/fourth-year participants or more years. The significance level (alpha) that was used in the data analysis is 0.05.

## RESULTS & DISCUSSION

The total number of participants was five hundred and forty (540) university students from a comprehensive Midwestern university. The validity of Core Competencies Scale used in this study was established using a technique known as Factor Analysis. The scale also parallels with the validated Core Competencies Scale used by Ruan, Edginton, Chin and Mok (2011b). Factor Analysis is a technique used by researchers to assess construct validity which provides evidence that the items in the survey actually measure the construct that are proposed to represent (Burton & Mazerolle, 2011). In addition, this technique was used in this study to reduce the large set of related variables to more efficient number of variables and also establish construct validity. Table 1 presents Core Competencies Scale (CCS), the values of the Factor Analysis were all greater than .90 which falls into the range of excellent. According to Kaiser (1974), a minimum of

.5 and values between .5 and .7 are average, values between .7 and .8 are good, values between .8 and .9 are great and values above .9 are excellent. In order to check the suitability of variable, the Bartlette's Test of Sphericity should be significant ( $p < .05$ ) and Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy should be above .60 or greater (Field, 2005). In this study, the Meyer-Olkin is greater than .6 and Bartlette's Test of Sphericity is less than .05.

**Table 1**

*Validity of the Core Competencies Scale*

Scale (number of items)	Factor Analysis Measures of Sampling Adequacy (MSA)
Communication (8)	.952
Critical Thinking (8)	.941
Character Development (8)	.928
Citizenship (5)	.953
Diversity (5)	.942
Global Understanding (6)	.931
Widening of Interest (6)	.961
Career and Vocational Development (6)	.934

*Note:* The items were rated on a 7-point Likert-type scale (7= Extremely High; 6=Very High; 5=High; 4=Middle; 3=Low; 2=Very Low; 1=Extremely Low).

The summaries of the demographic information of the sample used in this study were reported including: (1) gender, (2) age, and (3) race and ethnicity. The descriptive statistics such as frequencies and percentages were calculated to provide a comprehensive summary of the demographic information.

**Gender and Age**

Table 2 shows the gender and age of the respondents. Exploring gender, the analysis indicates that 67% of the participants were female, and 33.0% were

male. Participants' ages ranged from 20 years older. In reviewing the ages, 84.7% of the participants were 20 years old to 25 years old; 7.6 % participants were 26 years old to 30 years old, and 7.7% were 31 years old and above.

**Table 2**

*Gender and Age of the Respondents*

Variable	Respondent (N=540)	
	n	%
Gender	Male	178 33.0
	<i>Female</i>	<i>362 67.0</i>
	<u>Total</u>	<u>540 100.0</u>
Age	<i>20-25 years old</i>	<i>457 84.7</i>
	26-30 years old	41 7.6
	31 and above	42 7.7
	<u>Total</u>	<u>540 100.0</u>

*Note:* The majority groups are presented in italic.

**Race and Ethnicity**

Table 3 presents the race and ethnicity of respondents in this study. The majority of the respondents were White/Caucasian (92.6%). The group that has the lowest number of respondents was the American Indian/Alaskan Native (.4%).

**Table 3**

*Race and Ethnicity of the Respondents*

Variable	Respondent (N=540)	
	n	%
Race & Ethnicity	Hispanic/Latino	5 .9
	<i>White/Caucasian</i>	<i>500 92.6</i>
	Asian/Pacific Islander	12 2.2
	Black/African American	7 1.3
	American Indian/Alaskan Native	2 .4
	Multiracial	6 1.1
	<u>Total</u>	<u>532 98.5</u>
	No response	8 1.5

*Note:* The majority group is presented in italics

**Table 4**

*Summary of Participants' Responses of Short Term Engagement*

Scale (Core competencies)	<i>n</i>	<u>Short term</u> <i>Mean</i>
Communication	299	146.63
Critical Thinking	299	158.63
Character Development	298	148.51
Citizenship	298	154.96
Diversity	298	150.70
Global Understanding	297	144.83
Widening of Interests	298	136.66
Career and Vocational Development	298	130.04

Notes: (a) Alpha level is set at .05; (b) Scale: 7= Extremely High; 6=Very High; 5=High; 4=Middle; 3=Low; 2=Very Low; 1=Extremely Low.

**Table 5**

*Summary of Participants' Responses of Moderate Engagement*

Scale (Core competencies)	<i>n</i>	<u>Moderate</u> <i>Mean</i>
Communication	299	158.80
Critical Thinking	299	150.10
Character Development	298	156.37
Citizenship	298	153.71
Diversity	298	160.32
Global Understanding	297	158.30
Widening of Interests	298	149.77
Career and Vocational Development	298	161.67

Notes: (a) Alpha level is set at .05; (b) Scale: 7= Extremely High; 6=Very High; 5=High; 4=Middle; 3=Low; 2=Very Low; 1=Extremely Low.

**Table 6**

*Summary of Participants' Responses of Long Term Engagement*

Scale (Core competencies)	<i>n</i>	<u>Long term</u> <i>Mean</i>
Communication	299	145.60
Critical Thinking	299	147.34
Character Development	298	145.62
Citizenship	298	145.29
Diversity	298	142.55
Global Understanding	297	144.57
Widening of Interests	298	153.20
Career and Vocational Development	298	147.95

Notes: (a) Alpha level is set at .05; (b) Scale: 7= Extremely High; 6=Very High; 5=High; 4=Middle; 3=Low; 2=Very Low; 1=Extremely Low.

**Table 7**

*P-Values – Comparison of Three Levels of Engagement*

Scale (Core competencies)	<i>n</i>	<i>df</i>	(1)Short (2)Moderate (3)Long <i>P - value</i>
Communication	299	2	.479
Critical Thinking	299	2	.734
Character Development	298	2	.628
Citizenship	298	2	.673
Diversity	298	2	.280
Global Understanding	297	2	.440
Widening of Interests	298	2	.511
Career and Vocational Development	298	2	.113

Note: Alpha level is set at .05 (95% Confidence Level)

Kruskal- Wallis test was used to determine the difference in students' perception of the development of core competencies comparing students' level of engagement in student organizations. The level of engagement were first recoded to form three groupings i.e. 1-2 semesters (short term), 3-4 semesters (moderate) and 5 semesters or more (long term). The analysis indicated that there were no statistically significant differences among the three groups i.e. short term, moderate and long term engagement as shown in Table 7. Reviewing the mean scores, it is interesting to note that there are transitions of the mean scores rank among the three groups. As shown in Table 4, 5 and 6, career and vocational development ranked lowest in short term engagement but ranked highest in the next level of engagement i.e. moderate engagement. In moderate engagement, widening of interests ranked lowest but ranked highest in long term engagement. This finding contradicts studies conducted by Gassman (2015) and Gassman et al. (2014) suggesting that students' level of engagement does have an impact on the development of skills. In addition, Table 8 presents the comparison of mean scores specifically looking at the highest and lowest mean scores in level of engagement among the three groups.

**Table 8**

*Comparison of Highest and Lowest Mean Scores of Core Competencies*

Group	Highest Mean Score	Lowest Mean Score
Short Term	158.63 <i>(Critical Thinking)</i>	130.04 <i>(Career and Vocational Development)</i>
Moderate	161.67 <i>(Career and Vocational Development)</i>	149.77 <i>(Widening of Interests)</i>
Long Term	153.20 <i>(Widening of Interests)</i>	142.55 <i>(Diversity)</i>

*Note:* Core Competencies Scale: 7= Extremely High; 6=Very High; 5=High; 4=Middle; 3=Low; 2=Very Low; 1=Extremely Low.

## CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATION

Literature suggests that level of engagement matters during one's involvement in student organizations because the more students participate in student organizations, the more they are likely to improve essential abilities that will be useful in the real world setting (Patterson, 2012). Bok's framework of competencies was used to examine the difference in the level of engagement in student organizations. The difference in the mean scores indicates that students tend to have a strong development of competencies when they participate for 3-4 semesters (moderate). As students stay longer, they are less likely to think they are improving more on these competencies. This study suggests that after three to four semesters of participation, complacency and boredom may set in. At that point, students might perceive they are improving their skills. It is recommended that faculty advisors should present new challenges for students who have been involved for a long period of



time. Faculty advisors also need to consider that students' participation remains interesting, refined and challenging in order to lessen complacency. Although there is a difference in the mean scores, future studies are recommended to address the non-statistically significant difference between these groups.

#### DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTERESTS

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

#### FUNDING

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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