Student organizations have existed for almost as long as educational institutions have. This chapter examines the historical role of student organizations in developing leadership capacity in students, as well as their current roles on high school and collegiate campuses in creating transformational environments for student leadership learning and growth.

The Significance of Student Organizations to Leadership Development

David M. Rosch, Jasmine D. Collins

Student-led organizations in secondary and postsecondary education have historically been popular among students as opportunities for cocurricular or extracurricular involvement (Eccles, 2005). Today, they continue to serve as primary avenues for developing the leadership capacity of those who engage in their activities. In 2015, more than one in four university first-year students reported being involved in student-led organizations during their first year in college (Rios-Aguilar, Eagan, & Stolzenberg, 2015). Although student involvement data are relatively sparse within high schools, a foundational national study revealed that more than one in three students participated in fine-arts, vocational, or academic-focused student clubs during their high school career (McNeal, 1995).

The degree of diversity within student organizations is difficult to understated and includes groups focused on academic issues, career development, governance, identity, cultural, and affinity preferences, and those related to sports, religious topics, service, and countless others (Dugan, 2013). These groups exist, broadly, to advocate their views to peers, serve as a welcoming environment for members, provide opportunities for interaction and goal achievement, and function as a collective voice for students within their environment. Although it would be impossible to focus on each of these topical areas, this chapter addresses issues and opportunities that are common to all students who seek to come together in formal organizations in high school and university campuses.

Related to student development, we borrow language from the adaptive leadership model (Heifetz, 1994), where we suggest student-led
organizations provide a “holding environment” in which students can learn from their peers, incorporate new perspectives, and practice new behaviors (p. 104). They offer students the ability to find their own voice within a group and develop their leadership identity (Komives, Longerbeam, Owen, & Mainella, 2006). They can also serve as a pipeline of involvement from secondary school to higher education and serve as the foundation of a professional network once students graduate. In addition, student organizations can serve as pebbles thrown into a pond, providing opportunities for widening the perspectives of their uninvolved peers through the waves of their activities within the hallways of their secondary schools and the quads of their university campuses.

This chapter examines the historical significance of student organizations and their contemporary potential for supporting the leadership development of those who participate within them. In this chapter, we examine the historical foundations of student organizations, using prominent and prototypical examples of student organization-led events to show the impact of these groups on student leadership development. We also show how student organization involvement is uniquely suited to accelerate leadership development, incorporating prevalent theories of young adult learning and growth.

The Historical Emergence of Student-Led Organizations

One of higher education’s most prominent and long-standing goals has been to foster social progress through the social and civic development of those who would likely go on to assume positions of social, religious, and/or political importance in society (Thelin, 2011). Given the structured opportunities for students to engage in specific leadership activities through involvement in student organizations, these organizations have played a significant role in fulfilling this civic mission even in the earliest collegiate contexts.

Foundations of Student Leadership. Debate clubs, eating clubs, and literary societies of the eighteenth century are among the earliest examples of college student groups that self-assembled along common interests in the pursuit of specific knowledge or particular skills (Thelin, 2011). Phi Beta Kappa, regarded as the oldest academic honor society and oldest Greek letter organization in the nation, was established at the College of William and Mary in 1776 by five students who were interested in creating an environment that would allow for the free exchange of ideas among like-minded student peers dedicated to the principles of liberal education (Phi Beta Kappa, n.d.). With the establishment of a Greek-letter name, an oath of secrecy, a motto, and secret handshake, the Phi Beta Kappa Society established some of the characteristics that would come to distinguish Greek-letter organizations from other campus student groups in the following centuries.
In addition to the uninhibited pursuit of intellectual curiosity afforded to members of Phi Beta Kappa and other secret societies, participation in student-led organizations also provided a space to learn skills such as collaboration, communication, and working together for the greater good. Eating clubs of the late 1800s provide an example of this type of collaborative leadership. Within these clubs, groups of students self-assembled, gathered resources, and assigned responsibilities such as collecting dues, negotiating with landlords to rent a dining space, and hiring a cook (Thelin, 2011).

Over time, student organizations evolved from small, self-assembled groups to more complex organizations that served as avenues for the student body to identify their peer leaders. Social hierarchies were established through democratic processes of voting for intercollegiate athletic team captains, designating the editor-in-chief of the student newspaper, and electing student government officials. These positional leaders were seen as the decision makers on campus and were often tapped to join the prominent honorary, Greek-letter, and secret societies from which local community and government leaders often emanated. Because these exclusive clubs were commonly reserved for men of senior class standing who had proven themselves as significant contributors to campus life, these selection processes also had the negative effect of serving to marginalize underrepresented students and to associate leadership with norms of masculinity and positional power.

Expanding Leadership Opportunities. Early in the twentieth century, the nation's most prestigious universities, and in turn, the clubs and organizations that denoted the “who's who” of campus life, remained almost entirely exclusive to White, Protestant, wealthy men. Consequently, African American men and women, White women, and students in religious minorities who attended these “integrated” institutions faced segregation, discrimination, and mockery when attempting to participate in the dominant campus culture (Allen, Epps, & Haniff, 1991; Thelin, 2011). This overt discrimination gave rise to student organizations that would provide a means for alternative campus engagement.

Black Greek Letter Organizations such as Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, and Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority were each founded at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs)—Cornell University in 1906, Indiana University in 1911, and Butler University in 1922, respectively. Despite rampant legal and de facto barriers to access for African American students in American higher education nationally, eight Black Greek Letter Organizations that exist on an international scale today were chartered at PWIs and Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) from 1906 to 1922. With governing principles such as public service, charity, improving society, and leadership, these organizations focused on the leadership development of members and enhancement of the local community from the start. The founders of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, for example, participated in the Women's Suffrage March in Washington, DC in
the spring of 1913—just 3 months after the organization’s inception (Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc., n.d.).

**Student Organizations as Avenues for Activism and Political Involvement.** By the middle of the twentieth century, an era of even more pronounced political involvement by students and student-led organizations emerged on a national scale. The nation’s largest student union, the U.S. National Student Association (NSA) served as a prototypical case. Founded in 1947, this organization brought together 800 delegates from 351 colleges, universities, and national organizations to serve as a national voice for campus concerns, advocate for student civil liberties, and promote increased access to higher education (Altbach, 1997). The NSA soon ballooned to roughly one million members, using a complex governance structure composed of elected local student leaders, national congressional delegates, and officers elected by the congress—all coordinated by a national supervisory board (Altbach). The NSA boasted an impressive bureaucratic structure, providing a national platform for students to educate campus administrators, fellow students, and the general public about important student issues such as free speech and education for all.

In contrast to the often moderate political leanings of the NSA, other student organizations gained national prominence for their unequivocal commitment to civil rights activism. The Congress of Racial Equity (CORE), founded by a group of students at Chicago Theological Seminary in 1942, is regarded as the first major civil rights organization to arise from the leadership of undergraduate students (Altbach, 1997). In the late 1940s, CORE students engaged in campus sit-ins to protest racial discrimination in collegiate athletic programs and segregation in public facilities such as restaurants and theaters. By the early 1960s, several prominent student organizations such as CORE and the powerful Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) banded together with community organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference to organize sit-ins, freedom rides, boycotts, and call for legislative action. Volunteers from the National Student Association also took part in these events, establishing an office in Atlanta, Georgia and using their networks to publicize events and garner community support (United States Student Association, n.d.).

**Lasting Impact of Student Organization Participation.** It is clear that student organizations have long played an integral role in shaping campus life, developing student leaders, and influencing local and national politics. The earliest debate clubs and literary societies facilitated the development of oratory and political skills necessary to serve in key legislative, judicial, and civic roles. Administrators at women’s colleges and HBCUs established social, academic, athletic, and Greek organizations unique to their own campus contexts and cultures (Kimbrough & Hutcheson, 1998). These organizations provided a space for students to establish their own social hierarchies and to exemplify the values most important to them. Today,
members of Black Greek Letter Organizations at both HBCU and PWI campuses perceive their organizations to be significant vehicles for leadership development because of the opportunities to perform leadership-related tasks. Moreover, members report increased leadership confidence as a result of participation in these organizations (Kimbrough & Hutcheson, 1998).

Owing in part to the NSA’s success in representing students, student governance organizations today are almost ubiquitous in secondary and postsecondary institutions. Participation in these kinds of postsecondary student government organizations has been linked to gains in practical leadership skills such as planning budgets and managing resources (Kuh, 1995). With high levels of peer interaction encouraged within these organizations, involvement in student government in college also fosters the development of interpersonal competencies such as autonomy, confidence, and self-awareness (Kuh). Remarkably, longitudinal research on adult political participation indicates that voluntary student involvement in politically salient youth organizations, such as high school student council, encourages long-term political participation such as performing community service and registering to vote, even 12 years later (McFarland & Thomas, 2006).

Involvement in civic activist-oriented student organizations such as the historic CORE and SNCC or today’s Black Lives Matter movement allows students to engage in collective action with key stakeholders, which serves as an important mechanism for student leadership and learning. Through political activism and community engagement, student leaders gain valuable experience in navigating complex bureaucratic structures, communicating strategies for change, and using data to inform decisions (Kezar & Maxey, 2014).

**Opportunities for Career Advancement.** Research is unequivocal in showing that student engagement within the kinds of student organizations discussed is associated with higher levels of persistence through graduation, increased leadership capacity, student academic and career success, and generalized cognitive and social development (Mayhew et al., 2016). Student organizations in high schools and universities focused on career development and training also played a long and historical role in developing the vocational leadership capacity in students (Reese, 2003). These organizations, such as the FFA (formerly Future Farmers of America), Technology Student Association, and Health Occupations Students of America, often are associated with local, regional, national, and international associations that provide high school students a means to become engaged at multiple levels.

Like other types of student organizations mentioned previously, a primary support for students in their leadership emergence is the role of adult professional advisors. These advisors often possess a specialized technical background that affords the ability to mentor students in helping them develop the capacity for success, focused on their specific chosen field of
study (Reese, 2003). Moreover, given that many professions require postsecondary education, students involved in these organizations often have the opportunity to continue their engagement from high school to a community college or university setting. For example, in many parts of the United States where strong high school FFA chapters exist, local community colleges and universities also host “CFFA” (Collegiate FFA) chapters as well. Chapter 8 (Bruce and Stephens) in this issue discusses the many benefits to establishing pipelines of engagement that bridge secondary and postsecondary education.

**Adolescent and Emerging Adult Development in Student Organizations**

Given the positive effects of student organizations on students and their future success, it makes sense to examine how these organizations help address the leadership development challenges facing high school and collegiate students. In many ways, student organizations are almost uniquely suited to supporting students in these issues. A host of human development theories show that learning and individual growth, including the development of leadership capacity, from adolescence through emerging adulthood can be maximized when placing individuals in settings where they can be meaningfully involved with peers (Astin, 1993, 1999).

**Student Organizations Provide Support for Predicted Identity Struggles.** Erik Erikson’s seminal stages of psychosocial development (Erikson & Erikson, 1998) depict adolescents (12–19 years) in a struggle of “identity vs. confusion” where individuals work to create a sustainable self-image and develop durable personal values. Within the subsequent stage of early adulthood (20–25 years), Erikson describes individuals in a struggle of “intimacy vs. isolation” where they seek to learn how to build durable and intimate relationships with others. Involvement in well-run student organizations provides healthy opportunities for students in secondary and higher education to address these personal developmental challenges. In choosing organizations in which to spend their time and invest their efforts, students reflect on their values, personal strengths, and goals. Through attending organization-coordinated meetings and events over the course of a quarter, semester, or year, students engage in a process of durable relationship-building with a variety of peers over time.

**Student Organizations Allow Exploration of Self-Authorship.** Building on Erikson’s research, Baxter Magolda (1992) describes a stage theory of advancing toward the self-authorship of one’s collegiate life that incorporates aspects of cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal development. Essentially, her model summarizes the transitions young and emerging adults make in choosing their values and goals. At beginning stages, young people often believe in what “authority” believes, defining oneself through external others, and seeking approval as the foremost goal in rela-
tionships. More mature adults, however, grow to possess a developed and grounded internal belief system and sense of self while recognizing the needs for mutuality in interpersonal relationships.

Although the participants in her longitudinal study consisted of university students, the developmental struggles described within Baxter Magolda’s model inarguably have their genesis in students’ high school years and earlier and therefore are relevant at any stage in youth and emerging adult development. Her model, although longitudinal and designed to describe cognitive development over several years, could also be adapted to describe students’ socialization and development of their thinking within well-run student organizations. As new members, they often initially possess a worldview of the organization and its context provided by older, more experienced peer members. Longer periods of involvement can lead to a stronger sense of self within the organization, a more balanced view of how the organization fits into its larger community, and a sense of mutuality with other organization members. Such growth, however, is not a given—structures that are identified in later chapters in this issue are crucial for it to emerge.

Student Organizations Build Psychosocial Capacities. Another popular and analogous model of human development that provides support for the benefits of student organization involvement is Kegan’s “Orders of Mind” (1995). Within the theory, individuals in adolescence through adulthood struggle first with managing their impulses and perceptions to make mature decisions in situations (what Kegan describes as the “Instrumental Mind”), then to systemically operate on one’s more durable needs, interests, and desires to more effectively contribute to human systems (the “Socialized Mind”), and if development is to continue, later create mutually beneficial interpersonal relationships (the “Self-Authoring Mind”; Kegan, 1995). Said another way, emerging adults first struggle to manage their own short-term impulses, then to coordinate and operate on long-term personal goals, and ultimately create systems of positive relationships with others. Well-run student organizations can provide the “holding environment” (Heifetz, 1994, p. 104) for students to grow in this context, placing students in roles of increasing responsibility and influence in interacting with their peers.

These overlapping models reveal how powerful students’ integrated involvement in organizations can be for their psychosocial development. Table 1.1 summarizes these models and provides examples of how student organizations can provide support for the development of students. When students take on a role within the group, they become more aware of their own strengths and weaknesses, personal values, and preferences through engaging in that role. Each additional role taken on provides more opportunities for further learning about oneself. Similarly, collaborating with peers within the organization for the purposes of goal achievement or strategic planning affords students the opportunity to engage in mutually beneficial
work that both strengthens the organization and can deepen relationships over time. Durable involvement in student organizations over time, if paired with critically reflective experiences, provides students the opportunity to continually operate on their sense of self and how they fit in with others.

**Student Organizations as Uniquely Suited for Leadership Development**

Chapters 2 (Sessa et al.), 3 (Mainella), and 4 (Kezar et al.) in this issue are dedicated to describing the structures and mechanisms by which student organizations can positively contribute to individual, group, and collectivist contexts of leadership development. With the remaining pages of this chapter, we seek to describe why student organizations, one option among many paths of involvement within educational institutions, may be particularly suited to comprehensively contribute to the leadership development of youth and emerging adults.

Leadership educators, Keating, Rosch, and Burgoon (2014) have advocated that leadership development initiatives should include more than a focus on student skill development and should attend to additional factors that contribute to students’ ability to practice behaviors associated with effective leaders. If any of these three factors are significantly missing from a student’s portfolio, behavior change is likely to be absent. Student organizations serve as an environment well suited for the development of each of these capacities. Participation is often voluntary, and even in the few instances where joining is mandatory (e.g., as part of a university major), the degree to which students authentically engage in the culture and
initiatives within the organization is left to students to decide for themselves. Moreover, activities within the organization are often founded in creating campus-based and community impact. Therefore, highly engaged students who experience success through their involvement often experience threefold levels of growth—as their skills improve, their leadership self-efficacy grows as well, given the real-world impact they see; and in such a volunteer-led setting, their motivation to lead increases as well.

In addition to individual capacity-building, student organizations also serve as settings where leadership can be developed collectively. Students are faced with decisions regarding how culture is to be built, how communication networks are to be established, how organizational decisions should be made, how conflict should be managed, how diversity and innovation are integrated within the group, and a host of other factors that influence how all members carry out their work (Griffith & Dunham, 2015). Well-designed student organizations construct mechanisms for their members to work collectively that not only support the development of individual capacity-building but also help students develop the skills to be successful working in groups and teams.

The mission of most student organizations is to create positive impact within their communities—through political advocacy, consciousness-raising, programmatic initiatives, and countless other avenues. The effect of well-run student organizations on student growth, therefore, often spreads beyond those who consider themselves active members. When students plan a rally, host a forum, coordinate an activity, or initiate a training event, those who participate are affected as well. Where leadership exists as a collectivist activity designed to raise the capacity of a greater community, student organizations often play the role of leadership catalyst, raising the capacity of the communities in which they engage.

Conclusion

Experiences within formal student organizations can optimally serve as an appropriate experimental laboratory for students as they develop a leader identity and practice their leadership skills and behaviors. These experiences shape the way they view themselves as well as their perspectives on how organizations should be designed and led.

We also believe the structures created within the student organizations mentioned in this chapter closely mirror the structures often found in professional and adult organizations. Large, stable student organizations with positive traditions, sustainable financial management, and successful recruitment and initiation of new members might look remarkably similar to successful mid- to large-sized businesses and nonprofit organizations in their administrative, budgetary, strategic planning, and human resource structures. Similarly, the structure of, and issues faced in, federal, state,
and local governments (e.g., budgeting, community engagement, and representing constituencies) often appear analogous to those in school-based student governance organizations. Student groups that newly emerge every year stemming from student-led innovative ideas face challenges and adopt organizational structures comparable to many entrepreneurial and start-up businesses. Moreover, identity-based and advocacy-focused student clubs play roles within their educational institutions that can mirror the functions of community organizations ranging from local (e.g., a community park district board) to national (e.g., Black Lives Matter activists) in their goals and actions in raising issues and the consciousness of those around them.

In each of these instances, well-run student organizations can serve as catalysts to adolescent and emerging adult leadership development. Although certainly not the only opportunity for leadership development in education, they are uniquely suited for this task.

References


**DAVID M. ROSCH** is associate professor in the Agricultural Education Program at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, where his teaching and research is focused on the leadership development of emerging adults.

**JASMINE D. COLLINS** is an assistant professor in the Agricultural Education Program at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, where her teaching and research center on social identity, leadership, and social issues.