

Promoting positive experiences: Student perceptions and future intentions from attending a Student Organization and Competition Fair

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Background. A representative study of 30,000 U.S. college graduates found that participation in extracurricular activities, organizations, and intensive projects more than doubled the chances of being engaged at work and “thriving” in all aspects of their well-being (Gallup, 2014). Facets of these findings have been reinforced and expanded in subsequent data collections (Auter, 2017; 2018), yet the literature has suggested that few graduates’ reported experiencing what Gallup calls the “Big 6”— 1) a winning combination of support from professors who cared, 2) made them excited about learning, 3) encouraged their dreams, 4) an internship or job that allowed them to apply what they were learning, 5) a long-term project, and 6) active involvement in extra-curricular activities (Busteed and Auter, 2018; Ray and Kafka, 2014). Although involvement in on-campus activities during college plays a critical role in student success, from bolstering a students’ sense of belonging to increasing retention and academic success, very few cases of success have been reported. A study conducted by the Ohio State University Center for the Study of Student Life (2017) found that “Students who are involved on campus have significantly higher cumulative grade point averages than students who are not involved (3.29 as opposed to 2.85) (p.5).

Purpose. Two important experiences that Textile and Apparel programs can offer and promote to positively impact our students and encourage success are Student Organizations and Competitions. Both of these opportunities have been found to establish a sense of belonging and contribute to the experiences students can use when seeking internships and pursuing industry careers. Design and merchandising competitions, particularly, offer students a long-term project in which they can invest their effort and resources. Often, these competitions give students an opportunity to chase their dreams and make connections with prominent figures in the fashion

industry. Thus, the purpose of the current study is to explore perceptions and future intentions of first-year fashion students as a result of participation in a student organization and/or a student competition.

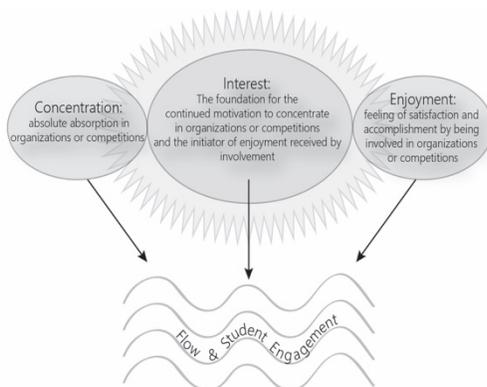


Figure 1. Flow & Student Engagement Theory

Theoretical Framework. Flow and Student Engagement Theory (figure 1) discusses three variables which base the level of involvement that students have with their extracurricular activities among high school students: Concentration, Interest and Enjoyment (Shernoff, Csikszentmihalyi, Schneider and Shernoff, 2003). This theory has been applied as a lens to evaluate

college students' intentions regarding participating in student organizations and/or competitions. For the purposes of this study, the researchers utilized the variable of interest or intent as the predictor of how absorbed students plan to become, as well as the initiator of the enjoyment that students could receive from their involvement in student organizations and competitions.

Method. Surveys were distributed to college freshmen students who never attended or participated in any industry-related activities at a Midwestern university. Freshmen students were invited to a half-day competition and student organization fair which allowed them to select an option to visit two different competition information sessions as well as have an opportunity to interact with eight different student organization's board members. Because of the preliminary nature of this study, open-ended questions regarding the students' experience during the fair and expected actions after along with a Likert-type of scale were adopted to measure future intention to participate in a student organization and/or external industry competition.

Results. A total of 80 responses were gathered and 75 usable responses were retained. By analyzing the open-ended questions regarding rationale for their participation during the fair, key themes were developed as follows: information seeking (58%), networking opportunity (24%), industry information (49%), and involvement (18%) as discussed in the previous literature. The majority of Freshman participants were surprised to learn about potential opportunities they never imagined and indicated the importance of being 'involved' in the extra curriculum. Regarding future action after the fair participation, 11.5% of participants indicated a strong intention to be involved in student organizations while 84.2% expressed an intention to participate in an external competition or prepare themselves to apply for a competition. To validate participants' responses, we also asked the participants to select (1) intention to join any student organizations and (2) external competitions in the future. The results show that more than 42% of strongly agreed that they would participate in at least one student organization, 28% agree, 11% neither agree nor disagree. Regarding intent to participate in a competition, 41% strongly agree, 41% agree, 11% neither agree nor disagree.

Discussion and Implications. The findings of this study indicate that the organization and competition fair had positive impacts on students in many ways. Similar to the findings of Kuech and Sanford (2014), the results of our study confirm that student participation in the information sessions encouraged and motivated them to pursue student organizations and future competitions. The interaction at the fair was found to be meaningful because this type of motivation is difficult to provide for students in the classroom environment. According to Neubert (2016), student participation in external competitions is expected to enhance learning in many ways including teamwork, social and emotional learning, opportunity for peer mentors, increasing intrinsic motivations, strengthening self-concept, and more (Neubert, 2016). Future study will monitor students as they progress through their academic program to further explore the impact of this outreach on the overall experience and fostering of the "Big 6" (Gallup, 2014) among Textile and Apparel students in this program.

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