

# STUDENT SUCCESS *in* COLLEGE

Promoting Student Success

## What Student Leaders Can Do

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Occasional Paper #8

### Six Conditions that Matter to Student Success

- I. "Living" Mission and "Lived" Educational Philosophy
- II. Unshakeable Focus on Student Learning
- III. Environments Adapted for Educational Enrichment
- IV. Clear Pathways to Student Success
- V. Improvement-Oriented Ethos
- VI. Shared Responsibility for Educational Quality and Student Success



**S**tudent leaders reap many benefits and rewards as a result of their involvements with campus organizations. In addition to enjoying the respect of their peers, they have opportunities to meet a variety of faculty, staff and students, exposing them to a range of different personalities and cultures. They typically grow in self confidence and practical competence as they learn how to manage their time, energy, and their group's financial resources. In addition, the challenges they encounter in the course of these and other activities draw them out of their comfortable patterns of thinking and responding to situations, helping them to become more flexible, responsive, and reflective (Kuh, 1995; Kuh & Lund, 1994).

In addition to these personal benefits, student leaders can contribute much to the quality of the learning environment, the experiences of their peers, and the larger campus community. Unfortunately, too often these potentially positive effects are not fully realized. Student governments get sidetracked on trivial issues. Social organizations inadvertently discourage participation by students from diverse backgrounds. Service clubs touch in relevant ways only a small fraction of those who need assistance. Established campus governance structures ignore or limit active, meaningful involvement by students.



National Survey  
of Student Engagement

Happily, some institutions stand out in stark relief. Students are actively engaged in a variety of campus committees and provide meaningful input to decision making groups. Large numbers of students take responsibility for their learning and are involved in teaching and working with other students in educationally purposeful ways as tutors and peer mentors in campus residences and student organizations.

The suggestions for student leaders that follow are based on an in-depth examination of 20 diverse four-year colleges and universities that have higher-than-predicted graduation rates and demonstrated through the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) that their policies, practices, and campus cultures support the success of students of differing abilities and aspirations. These institutions are referred to below as either educationally effective schools or high performing institutions.

### ***1. Understand and embrace your organization's mission, history and culture***

Student organization members at strong performing institutions understand their organization's mission, history and culture and draw on this knowledge in order to persuasively articulate what the group is doing and values and why supporting the group is so important. Leaders must understand their organization's purpose, values, and aspirations if they are to explain why the group exists and distinguish it from other groups on campus. Gonzaga University's mission is to empower students to strive for social justice through community involvement, education, and public service. Given the University's Jesuit mission, values and traditions, service-learning and civic engagement are central to Gonzaga in general and student organizations in particular—a message that is clearly and regularly communicated to members.

Student leaders at strong performing colleges recognize that their organizations do not exist in a vacuum and that understanding the “big picture” is essential. For example, George Mason University (GMU) students come from a wide range of racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds; in 2004 ethnic minorities comprised approximately 33% of the total student population. This diverse student population coupled with the University's response to the September 11, 2001 attack on the World Trade Center illustrate the importance of how this institution's history and context influences student leaders and their organizations. Many of GMU's Islamic students worried about their safety shortly after the

attack. Students initiated dialogues with Islamic students, and learned from each other during this difficult time. GMU's history and context then and now influence student organizations' legislative and programmatic agendas on a regular basis. Understanding the unique institutional ethos and how this ethos developed over time pays huge dividends for student leaders and the peers they serve.

### ***2. Collaboration is essential***

When talking about their relationships with advisors and constituents, student leaders at high performing institutions stressed the importance of doing *with*, rather than doing *for* (without ever using this “with/for” terminology). Student leaders favored faculty or staff advisors who formed genuine partnerships with them rather than simply having an advisor do the organization's work or leaving student leaders alone to fend for themselves. In this sense, student leaders preferred organizational advisors who listened, offered advice, shared responsibility and power, and helped them “get things done.” In return, effective student leaders

were good listeners, open to offering advice and sharing responsibility and power with their constituents. Most important, they were focused on helping their constituents get things done. They see their role as doing things *with* students to benefit students, rather than, for example, taking action or enacting legislation without soliciting or taking into account the views of their members or constituents.

For example, the University of Kansas expects students to have a voice in

campus governance. Indeed, the University requires that all policy committees (with the exception of personnel committees) have a minimum of twenty percent of their members be students. As one student senate officer commented, “Students are on an equal playing field with faculty and others in terms of governance.” Clearly, students and their “voices” are very important at the University.

### ***3. Improve group performance by doing less better***

The actions of student leaders at strong performing schools suggest they favor “doing less better.” Leaders exhibited a fluid, quality improvement-oriented style of leadership in these organizations. Often they lamented that by the time they assumed their position, oriented themselves to their responsibilities, convened organizational leaders and members, assessed the political landscape, and established a legislative agenda, insufficient time remained to fully accomplish their

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objectives. The relatively short length of a leader's term of office (usually one year) contributes to student leaders' eventual gravitation toward a less ambitious and more focused legislative agenda.

While student retrospective sense-making of their leadership experiences resulted in agreements about the importance of continually setting, monitoring, negotiating, and scaling back organizational expectations and goals, this fluid style of leadership neither tempered nor derailed their desire to improve their group. These flexible, responsive, and never quite satisfied leaders wanted to leave the organization "a little better" than it was when they assumed office. They intentionally crafted agendas, policies, and practices that channeled energies to the activities that improve the lives of organization members and the student body as a whole.

A mea culpa is in order along the lines of the cliché, "Do as I say, not as I do." While student leaders' didn't always heed their own advice to do less better, their advice is sound.

#### ***4. Focus on creating win-win scenarios for the organizational members and the students they serve***

Meaningful intellectual and social experiences benefit both the organizational membership and the larger campus community. Effective student organizations have leaders who recognize that their best work is done when both their members and the larger campus community benefit. Leaders recognize that when learning is woven into the fabric of the co-curricular experience, organizational members are personally more satisfied and more receptive to serving others. The University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) blended membership with service to others in its Student Leadership Institute (SLI) which annually trains peer educators to assist new students. Student leaders participate in intensive training sessions, classroom instruction, and weekly two-hour field placement either in a department on campus or community service organization. In addition to performing an invaluable university service, SLI participants also benefit by developing their leadership abilities as they collaborate with other student leaders and faculty. At Miami University the Student Judicial Court participates in extensive training and development opportunities, which energize Court members, who in turn become more motivated to serve their peers and institution — a win-win situation. Student leaders and advisors might consider experimenting with innovative practices that allow the group's members to develop skills and competencies while serving others. This blended agenda fosters student success by ensuring educational enrichment for leaders, members and constituents.

#### ***5. Strengthen the organization by strengthening its members***

An organization is only as strong as its individual members. While leaders recognized the need to "hit the ground running" and to get things done, they also made it a priority to sponsor opportunities for their members to take some share of responsibility for the organization's performance which in turn would give them a chance to grow. Typical initial member development offerings included workshops and retreats to orient new members and re-orient existing members, clarify and reaffirm the organization's mission, and set the legislative agendas. Leaders also stressed the importance of setting high expectations for all members and using "whatever happens" throughout the year as on-going learning opportunities for their members. They figured out different ways to get and keep their members involved, setting high but reasonable expectations for each level of involvement. At Alverno College, student clubs and organizations are a mainstay of student social life, serving as an outlet for student engagement in the surrounding community. Students estimated that at least half of the student body is very active in student clubs and that student organizations spearhead most campus volunteer activities. Offering varying levels of involvement while maintaining high expectations remains sensitive to the complex lives of non-traditional age Alverno students, many of whom have families and work full-time.

#### ***6. Celebrate important events, transitions, and passages***

Student leaders at strong performing schools keep their organizations vibrant by using rituals to recognize and reward the contributions of their members. For example, selecting/electing rituals ensures that important instrumental tasks will occur on a regular basis, such as electing new officers. At Wabash College the Sphinx Club exemplifies the "Wabash man." Prospective students, participating in Wabash welcome rituals scheduled at the start of the year, learn quickly about the espoused values of the organization, which exemplifies core club and institutional values such as preserving campus traditions, campus unity, leadership, academic excellence, and community service. The Sphinx Club uses other annual organizational rituals (socializing leadership team rituals and establishing a governing agenda rituals) to continually reinforce these values. Understanding the rhythm of the semester and how to interpret and shape the meaning embedded in these rituals can enhance student learning and leader effectiveness.

**Questions to Ponder:**

While these recommendations are neither revolutionary nor exhaustive, they represent some of the ways student leaders can make powerful positive contributions to the learning environments of their campus and the personal development of the members of their organizations and other students. The questions that follow might help you reflect on and take steps to improve your approach to leadership.

1. Does your organization’s mission—espoused and enacted—emphasize student success?
2. How does your organization define student success?
3. How might you implement the “doing less better” and “doing with” (rather than doing for”) ideas while at the same time making your organization more effective?
4. What kind of learning opportunities does your organization provide for its members?
5. How might knowing the history and context of your institution and organization enhance your effectiveness as a leader and enhance your organization’s effectiveness?
6. How might you offer members varying levels of involvement in your organization?
7. How might these recommendations be translated into specific policies, practices and programs at your institution?
8. What barriers exist for enacting these suggestions?

Partial answers to these questions from different types of strong performing institutions around the country are offered in *Student Success in College: Creating Conditions That Matter*. The book features what different types of educationally effective college and universities do to promote student success. The Documenting Effective Educational Practice (DEEP) project was supported with generous grants from Lumina Foundation for Education and the Center of Inquiry in the Liberal Arts at Wabash College. Altogether, the 24-member research team talked with more than 2,700

people during its 40 multiple-day site visits to the DEEP schools. Six properties and conditions shared by these colleges and universities are discussed along with a wide array of effective educational policies and practices that if adapted appropriately can help a campus create and sustain a culture that supports student success. The book can be used in leadership development workshops, strategic planning activities, and collaborative efforts between academic and student affairs. A companion volume, *Assessing Conditions to Enhance Educational Effectiveness: The Inventory for Student Engagement and Success* will be available in September 2005 and provides a process that can be adapted to identify areas of student leadership and governance and other areas of institutional functioning that can be improved to promote student success.

**Sources:**

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<b>Project DEEP Colleges and Universities</b>	
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