STUDENT PERSPECTIVES ON JOINING STUDENT ORGANIZATIONS

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Abstract

This doctoral case study examines student perspectives on joining student organizations. Twenty students participated in focus groups to assist the researcher in learning about why students decide to join clubs and organizations. Through inductive analysis of documentation relevant to current institutional initiatives linked with student organization involvement, NSSE data pertinent to the subject university, and focus group interviews, three key findings emerged. Those findings are belongingness is a key factor to engagement, development of transferable skills is a benefit, and participating in student organizations develops leadership potential. Recommended suggestions for practice include an understanding of the relationship between student organizations and student engagement, utilizing student organizations to develop skills, and understanding student organizations’ role in developing leaders. Recommended future research includes conducting similar research at other institutions of higher education, differences between student organization leaders and general membership, understanding why students do not get involved, further exploration on NSSE data results and levels of involvement from freshmen to senior years, and further research on EDI initiatives and student organization involvement with sense of belonging. The study addresses a gap in the literature on why students decide to join student organizations, not only from a benefit of involvement perspective.

Keywords: student organizations, student affairs, student engagement, sense of belonging, skill development, leadership development
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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

This study seeks to learn more about why students decide to get involved with student organizations during their undergraduate academic careers. Significant research exists about the benefits of participation in student organizations (Dugan, 2013; Friedlander & MacDougall, 1992; Gellin, 2003; Kuh, 1993, 1995, 2009; Kuk, Thomas & Banning, 2008; Richmond, 1986; Smith & Chenoweth, 2015), but there is limited research about why a student chooses to participate in a club or organization on their campus (Trowler, 2010). By learning more about the lived experiences of students who actively engage in a student organization, student affairs professionals will be able to develop a deeper understanding and appreciation of the circumstances that contribute to a student’s decision to join.

The study involved a purposeful sampling of students between the ages of 18 – 25 verified via the institution’s student organization software as being a current member of a registered club or organization. More specifically, the identified participants are part of one the subject institution’s student organization categories, acknowledged as club sports, fraternities/sororities, academic, fine arts, service or cultural councils. The methodology used for this study was case study. As Baxter and Jack (2008) state, “a qualitative case study is an approach that facilitates exploration of a phenomenon within its context using a variety of data sources. Ensuring that the issue explores not just one lens, but rather a range of lenses which allows for multiple facets of the phenomenon to be revealed and understood” (p. 544). It is an expectation that this approach will prompt campus leaders, at the institution under investigation, to consider how best to structure programs, services, and the allocation of resources in order to reinforce the importance of student organization involvement. The knowledge generated from
the various data sources of this study will inform student affairs practitioners, especially those working with student organizations.

This chapter includes a statement of the problem under investigation with supporting evidence from the relevant literature on the topic. Next, the significance of the study is identified, as well as, the specific research question at the core of the study. In conclusion, this chapter will introduce and connect the theoretical framework to the research by providing both the structure and perspective needed to guide each phase of this scholarly work.

**Statement of the Problem**

Student affairs professionals can identify the benefits in supporting intentionally purposeful engagement opportunities, such as participation in student organizations, but there is minimal research, from the student perspective, on why students decide to get involved in co-curricular activities. As a result, student affairs professionals may not have the breadth of information needed to address the role of student engagement as it relates to the management and development of student organizations; potentially minimizing the ability to inform industry best practices.

In recent years, various sources have expressed widespread concern whether undergraduate students are learning enough in college and whether institutions are providing intentionally purposeful learning opportunities (Kilgo, Ezell Sheets, and Pascarella, 2014, p. 509). Many educational professionals would agree that students need to develop both professionally and personally during their collegiate years, and student engagement serves as a foundation for intellectual and developmental growth (Astin, 1984; Cooper, Healy & Simpson, 1994; Dugan, 2013; Foreman & Retallick, 2012; Friedlander & MacDougall, 1992; Huang & Chang, 2004; Kuh, 2009; McCormick, Kinzie & Gonyea, 2013; Webber, Krylow & Zhang,
According to an article by Dugan (2013), 80% of students participate in at least one college organization by the end of their senior year. Research findings support how involvement in a student organization can have a positive influence on a wide array of developmental outcomes for students (Astin, 1984; Cooper, Healy & Simpson, 1994; Dugan, 2013; Foreman & Retallick, 2012; Friedlander & MacDougall, 1992; Gellin, 2003; Kinzie & Gonyea, 2013; Kuh, 1993, 1995, 2009; Kuk, Thomas & Banning, 2008; Richmond, 1986; Smith & Chenoweth, 2015; Webber, Krylow & Zhang, 2013). It is critical that educators acknowledge how organizational involvement influences a student’s growth and development, and strategize ways to affect student learning.

Participating in campus clubs and organizations is one way for students to become purposefully involved in their educational experience. Typically, as students participate in student organizations, they experience gains in specific development areas, such as cognitive skills (Gellin, 2003); interpersonal skills (Huang & Chang, 2004); and developmental skills (Foubert & Grainger, 2006). Furthermore, student organizations provide a learning opportunity for the application of practical skills learned in the classroom, resulting in student growth (Foubert & Grainger, 2006).

Astin (1984) proposed that there were links between student interactions outside of the classroom and a student’s overall collegiate experience. That, college student success is directly influenced by the amount of time spent on intentionally purposeful activities (Astin, 1984). Involvement is associated with multiple variables of academic success including higher retention rates, increased satisfaction rates with the educational experience, elevated rates of academic
performance and cognitive growth, and the advancement of career-related competencies (Astin, 1984). In general, studies about involvement encompass the time spent in co-curricular activities, such as student organizations, to the acquisition of specific skills and student growth.

This influences how scholars and practitioners connect learning with specific student experiences by highlighting how student activities and student organization best practices intersect with academic systems, procedures, and curriculum. Scholars and practitioners, then, acknowledge the potential to strengthen the learning environment for both in and out of the classroom experiences. For example, by highlighting the intersection between the Association of American Colleges & Universities (AACU) high impact practices and co-curricular learning, educational methods involving active collaboration and peer influence can be identified and connected to student engagement, development, and learning.

Research on student involvement has focused on the benefits of being involved (Dugan, 2013; Friedlander & MacDougall, 1992; Gellin, 2003; Kuh, 1993,1995, 2009; Kuk, Thomas & Banning, 2008; Richmond, 1986; Smith & Chenoweth, 2015) from a scholarly and practitioner perspective. Particularly the relationship between participation and skill development (Kuk, Thomas, & Banning, 2008) with a student organization, but not what attracted students to join. Specifically, the qualitative research on why a student chooses to engage is minimal. This gap in the research has a direct impact on implementing a strong student organization program for higher education institutions. To enhance the learning environment, higher education professionals need to conduct qualitative research to analyze what students believe they have learned through a student organization experience. Simply, professionals working in higher education need to establish a better understanding of why students get involved with co-
curricular experiences and which of those experiences result in the desired learning and leadership outcomes (Foreman & Retallick, 2012).

To create the necessary understanding needed by student affairs professionals, this case study incorporated specific data points beyond just what was collected through interviews. Additional data sources included a review of institutional programs, such as New Student Orientation and the campus’s student organization fair, along with an analysis of these programs to determine if the programmatic intent of the activities related to student organization involvement. Also analyzed was data relevant to the study from the institution’s student organization management software. Lastly, institutional data from NSSE (National Survey of Student Engagement) related to student involvement was examined to determine potential relationships relevant to student organization involvement. All of these additional data sources provide the breadth of details needed to address the research problem and analyze it from a landscape wider than just interviews.

This study informs best practices for student affairs practitioners working with student organizations by exploring why students choose to join student organizations. Strategically, as a result, campus leaders responsible for student organization engagement will be equipped to address student needs and enhance their engagement experiences (Burke, 2011) and learning environment. The data collected from this qualitative study will be valuable in helping student affairs professionals identify pathways to co-curricular activities and programs enhancing the student experience. This data will augment the prior research focused on the benefits of participating in student organizations, and help to evolve the understanding of student engagement. Lastly, the data may find connections between the curricular and co-curricular
focuses of the institution that connect learning to both in and out of classroom experiences; providing a holistic approach to a student’s education.

This research will serve to be particularly important for student affairs practitioners; and higher education professionals involved in developing curriculum, training, and experiential learning opportunities related to student organizations involvement, and may have implications for other non-curricular learning. By understanding levels of engagement from a student perspective, this research helps to align student activities and student organization best practices with educational systems and procedures that support specific learning outcomes associated with student organization involvement.

**Significance of the Research Question**

This research study serves to expand practitioner knowledge on student organization development by understanding the lived experiences of students and their rationale for participation. Much of the research on student organization involvement highlights the impact of student involvement in student organizations, particularly in regards to the influence on student development and growth (Dugan, 2013; Kuk, Thomas & Banning, 2008; Smith & Chenoweth, 2015). However, that impact is only a piece of the framework needed for designing intentional co-curricular activities that are educationally purposeful. This study emphasizes the additional elements needed, by including the student perspective and combining it with current research, on how to inform the programmatic design and relevant best practices for student organizations.

Previous research has emphasized some preliminary indicators that presume a student’s ability to articulate the skills they have developed resulting from their involvement in student organizations (Bowman & Seifert, 2011; Foubert & Grainger, 2006). Therefore, it would seem likely that students can articulate these skills in meaningful ways that support their future goals.
However, this also needs further examination to solidify the ability for students to recognize, understand, and articulate their reasons for joining have been both achieved and satisfied. It is important for higher education professionals to understand why students join student organizations, and specifically what factors correlate to the student’s reason for joining. Lastly, upon consideration of student success, scholars and practitioners will need to examine how best to incorporate learning into student organization programs at their respective institutions, including, but not limited too, integrating the skills necessary for future success.

It is important that students today be able to explain how the skills they acquired through their co-curricular experiences are transferable to a specific job, application or graduate school program. Likewise, it is important for educators to remember, “students enter college with the expectation that they will acquire the knowledge, the skills, and the abilities to enter the workforce. Graduates expect that they will have acquired the skills necessary to perform their jobs and advance their careers. In the modern knowledge economy, employers have an expectation that a college education will provide graduates with the employability skills required to perform their jobs” (Rosenberg, Heimler, & Morote, 2012, p. 3). Therefore, as research has stated, if involvement with student organizations can provide educational opportunities for students to develop and acquire skills, it would seem that such involvement contributes to a student’s expectation of what they will learn (Bowman & Seifert, 2011; Foubert & Grainger, 2006).

Furthermore, it would seem that a student’s recognition, understanding, and articulation of the skills they have learned could have a significant impact on the learning environment, including the achievement of specific learning outcomes contributing to student development and employability. Given this understanding of achievement, it seems imperative that educators
enhance their understanding of why students join student organizations. In particular, student affairs professionals need to recognize what attracts students to a specific collegiate opportunity in order provide a robust learning environment influenced by both the professional and student perspectives.

**Positionality Statement**

As a professional working in student affairs, I must be conscious of how my positionalities potentially influence my research on this topic. As an individual who has worked in higher education for more than 18 years, there are certain professional beliefs and values, which could unintentionally, or even intentionally, affect the process and results of the research. In developing as a scholar-practitioner, it is imperative that researchers be fully aware of what their own biases are and how those inherent preferences could influence the outcomes of one’s study (Briscoe, 2005).

As a student affairs professional, I strongly believe in opportunities for students to enhance their learning outside of the traditional classroom environment through co-curricular activities. In particular, I believe that becoming involved with student organizations is key to student success. I recognize how that viewpoint relates to my ability to objectively observe, analyze and decipher information surrounding the process of this research study. It is critical to consider my role as a researcher, and allow the facts to surface organically, and in an authentic format; not weighed down by my professional opinions.

Professionals, I support the idea due to involvement with student organizations, students do in fact learn, develop and grow. In my opinion, this involvement enhances a student’s ability to define and cultivate their skills. Again, my belief as a researcher is that involvement is important to student learning, and therefore acknowledging how I will address that in this study
to minimize an unintentional outcome is key. It will be important to hear the voices of the participants in this research, not overshadowed by a researcher’s positionality.

Additionally, one of the challenges, which my current institution faces, is the evolution of a strong, intentional student organization program. Because of my daily work, and my desire to improve student organizations, there may be perceptions and other realities affecting my approach and interpretations of the findings. It is critically important to understand how my own personal and professional goals for improvements relating to involvement with student organizations do not infringe upon the actual information received or influence the legitimacy of the research.

Given the nature of my work, it is important to recognize the potential biases I might have because of my relationships with students and colleagues that could potentially challenge the interpretation and analysis of study results and observations. As Bourke (2014) states, “the concept of self as research instrument reflects the likelihood that the researcher’s subjectivity will come to bear on the research project and any subsequent reporting of findings” (p. 3). Awareness of our identities and biases are important in eliminating possible conflicts associated with the research. Each of us brings “ourselves” to the research table, and to minimize challenges associated with one’s inquiry, it is important to develop an understanding of ourselves as researchers to achieve the most authentic results. Efforts were made for this study in minimizing the impact of any potential biases by recognizing specific areas influencing the interpretations and analysis of the research. Ultimately, the focus on uncovering answers to the research question(s) is important to influencing the future of higher education by providing student affairs practitioners’ the knowledge for working with student organizations and the students involved.
Research Problem and Research Question

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to garner a better understanding of why students join student organizations. The study explores how students define involvement with student organizations, what inclined them to join and how it influenced their overall collegiate experience. This case study was conducted at a four-year public institution in Western NY.

The significance of participation in student organizations is that it may define why co-curricular involvement is an important aspect of a student’s own academic growth and development. Furthermore, campus organizations provide a learning environment that reinforces skill development, awareness of achievements, and personal self-discovery for students. The following research question, why do students join student organizations, guides this study. Additionally, the following question, based on a student’s response, will serve as sub-question:

1. Upon reflection, was there something which drew a student to get involved with student organizations and was that need fulfilled?

Understanding the answers to these questions positions student affairs professionals to enhance a student's educational experience and cultivate student organization programs and services, which provide positive learning and developmental outcomes.

Overview of Research Approach

This study adopted a qualitative approach for data collection; informed by a constructivist-interpretive paradigm focused on understanding the problem of practice from those experiencing it (Pontorotto, 2005). Additionally, Yin defines case study research as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used” (Yin, 1984, p. 23). Through the collection of information directly from
students, the research design employed methodology similar to Merriam’s (1998) definition of case study methodology. Merriam (1998) described how case study methodology examines educational processes, problems, and programs to ultimately improve practice.

The analysis of documentation relevant to current institutional initiatives promoting student organization involvement is incorporated into the study, including the most recent data from the NSSE survey. In addition to NSSE, specific institutional programs also incorporate the role of engagement into their programmatic practices encouraging involvement with student organizations. One such program for the institution at the center of this case study is New Student Orientation. The documentation associated with New Student Orientation provides an analytic review of how the institution at the center of this case study might influence a student’s decision to get involved with student organizations by discussing engagement opportunities during the two-day orientation and reviewing the survey results for the program. As part of this study, it is important to create an understanding of how institutional programs encourage student organization involvement.

Beyond that, the reports and documentation directly linked with the student organization management software, Engage, were studied. The information through the software system provides context for who uses the management tool, and how often. From the management software, the analysis of participation rates in was conducted to understand what particular student organizations students were joining. This analysis of a student’s interaction with the software provides further perspective on the connections between the student and student organization. Overall, the documentation provides corroborating evidence that is useful when adopting a case study methodological approach (Yin, 2013).
In addition to a review of the aforementioned data sources, observations were a tactic used as part of the methodological approach for this case study. As Yin (2013) remarks, observations can serve as a useful tool in providing additional information pertinent to the topic under examination. Specifically, researcher observations were conducted during the student organization involvement fair, which is held each semester.

Following an analysis of reports, documentation, and observations, focus group interviews were employed to collect data highlighting a student’s own experience related to student organizations. As Yin (2013) states, interviews can serve as one of the most important sources of data collection for a case study. A focused interview approach for this study was used (Yin, 2013).

This case study supports the collection of evidence from multiple sources to help substantiate the findings (Yin, 2014). Each of the data collection procedures provides the necessary information for developing an in-depth understanding of why students engage in student organizations and are essential to this study’s overall credibility.

Definition of Key Terminology

**Co-curricular activities** - refers to activities, programs, and learning experiences that complement, in some way, what students are learning in school—i.e., experiences that are connected to or mirror the academic curriculum (Abbott, 2014).

**Student engagement** - refers to the degree of attention, curiosity, interest, optimism, and passion that students show when they are learning or being taught, which extends to the level of motivation they have to learn and progress in their education (Abbott, 2014).

**Student involvement** - student involvement refers to the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience (Astin, 1984).
**Student organization** - is an organization run by college students where student growth and development influenced by peer-groups (Astin, 1999).

The subsequent section will introduce and describe the theoretical framework for this study. The theoretical framework provides investigative direction in determining how conduct the research, and guides the information collected for analysis. As Anfara & Mertz (2006) state, “part of participating in this scholarly conversation and documenting your contribution involves looking carefully at the relationship between your study and the theory you have used” (p. 194). In essence, the theoretical framework serves to outline and align the research focus, and without it, a study loses its strength and cogency.

**Theoretical Framework**

Amongst student affairs professionals, Astin's (1984) theory of student involvement is widely known and referenced. In 1984, Astin developed his theory as a foundation for examining the notion that when students become more actively engaged in their educational environment, they are more likely to succeed. Astin (1984) defined this process as an inputs-outputs-environment model. Inputs are those elements, such as student background and views; influenced by outputs. Outputs are those items, which take what a student learns, and considers its interaction with the environment. Simply put, this theory is defined as an “interactive person-environment model which focuses on the variables of time and commitment within the context of a student becoming involved at his or her respective college or university” (Clay, 2016, p. 23). Today, researchers and practitioners in higher education still commonly use this theory. Many student affairs practitioners, due to the emphasis placed on the factors that contribute to student engagement, acknowledge this theory’s impact on professional best practices. Additionally,
scholars such as Gellin (2003), Kuh (1993, 1995, 2009), Kezar & Kinzie (2006), Richmond (1986), and Tinto (2006) have utilized this theory as a foundation for their research initiatives.

Tinto (2006) used this theory as a basis for illustrating student experiences and how involvement, upon consideration of the environment, provides a rationalization for student engagement and persistence. Specifically, Tinto (2006) used Astin's (1984) theory to help develop and refine his theory of student departure introduced in the early 1990's. Tinto (2006) viewed student experiences from a retention perspective but incorporated concepts similar to Astin (1984), which defines that the level of student engagement impacts the levels of student connectedness and success (Clay, 2016) with an institution.

Astin's (1984; 1999) theory is considered to have direct implications on the landscape of higher education regarding student involvement. His work on explaining how involvement can lead to positive learning outcomes for students has been instrumental in supporting the work of student affairs practitioners since its inception. As Case (2010) stated, this "landmark research on college students and higher education trends has assisted college and university leaders to recognize that the full spectrum of the college context holds potential for student learning and development" (p. 30). Astin saw the necessity of moving beyond content theory to finding a way to help students connect through involvement (Richmond, 1986).

Astin (1984) developed conclusions on student involvement based on his observations of students and their inputs, outputs, and environment. What became apparent to Astin (1984) was that students who had participated in sororities, fraternities, or almost any type of co-curricular activity were more likely to remain in college and persist; directly affecting retention factors. In addition to college student persistence, Astin's interest in “talent development and the cultivation of educational excellence contributed to the development of the student involvement theory”
(Case, 2010, p. 31). Astin (1984) was not just interested in retention; certainly, that was important, but he viewed the development of the student and their talents of great importance, and “being more comprehensive than simply developing a person's cognitive abilities” (Case, 2010, p. 31). As Richmond (1986) stated in his interview with Astin, the student involvement theory acknowledged the usefulness of developing talents and skills through a variety of different activities and programs. This theory has a direct correlation with this research study by examining if the talents and skill developments associated with engagement with student organizations correlates with a student’s decision to participate.

Astin (1984), himself, summarized the theory of involvement in a simple statement, "Students learn by becoming involved" (p. 133). This perspective on involvement was much more holistic because it considered both what a student brings to the learning environment (the reason for joining) as well as what institutions provide (the benefits).

**Basic Claims/Tenets of Astin’s Theory of Student Involvement**

As I have discussed in the previous section, the core concepts of Astin's (1984) theory comprised of three elements; inputs, outputs, and the environment. In addition to these three elements, Astin’s (1984) theory of student involvement adopted five basic claims or tenets, which are:

- Involvement refers to the amount of physical and psychological energy that a student devotes to the academic experience;
- Regardless of its object, involvement occurs along a continuum, that is different students manifest varying degrees of involvement in various objects at different times;
- Involvement has both quantitative and qualitative features;
• The amount of student learning and personal development associated with any educational program is directly proportional to the quality and quantity of student involvement in that program;

• The effectiveness of any educational policy or practice is directly related to the capacity of that policy or practice to increase student involvement (Astin, 1999, p. 519).

This theory directly focuses on student behavior and motivation as a means of assessing the degree of learning and growth taking place because of a student’s involvement. Each of the claims or tenets listed above shapes the outcome of a student’s engagement. This study will analyze each of the specific elements of the theory as part of the research analysis. In the following sections of this chapter, the explanation for each tenet is provided, along with the relationship between the theoretical framework and the study’s focus.

**Investment of psychosocial and physical energy.** Upon the consideration of why students might join student organizations, it is important to acknowledge how each student’s perception of participation and involvement, plus their willingness to put forth the required energy, impacts whether or not they participate in a student group. The question that is important to consider is whether the investment in time and energy sways a student’s decision to join a student organization? As Astin (1985) postulated in his theory, involvement is directly influenced by the attention given and a belief in its importance; resulting in a more positive outcome.

**Involvement is continuous.** The standard of participation is likely to vary amongst students according to Astin (1984). Not every student is going to get involved in the same ways or at the same levels, so the questions are whether or not that impacts the student’s reasoning when contemplating whether to join. When considering involvement along a continuum, this
Involvement may be qualitative and quantitative. Luckily, for many researchers, Astin's (1984) theory has been adaptable to both qualitative and quantitative methods. For this study, to garner the most in-depth understanding of student participation in student organizations, a qualitative approach is applied. The flexibility of this theoretical framework is appreciated for supporting a variety of research focuses.

Being involved is directly proportional. According to Astin (1984), the amount of time spent along with the quality and quantity of the experience affects student involvement. Regarding this research, how does that sentiment apply to why students might join a student organization? A question for this area might have to be whether or not students have been involved with student organizations before, and if there is a correlation with involvement that encourages further engagement, particularly if it was a positive experience. For example, based on Astin’s (1984) theory of student involvement, there are direct correlations between peers, therefore expanding opportunities for involvement. Astin (1984) went on to state that the strongest single source of influence on cognitive and affective development is a student’s peer group; the greater the interaction with peers, the more favorable an outcome. He proposed that "the power of the peer group can be found in the capacity of peers to involve each other more intensely in experiences" (Foubert & Grainger, 2006, p. 169).

The implication of this finding is critical regarding the validation of the impact that student organizations have on student development, and for possible consideration of why students join student organizations. Furthermore, the interactions amongst peers with these
groups influence members as well. Therefore, understanding how these behaviors influence involvement may help student affairs professionals figure out why students initially join.

**Institutional policy or practice implications.** In considering why students join student organizations, it would be important to recognize how institutional policies and practices support opportunities for increased involvement amongst students as a means of enticing them to join clubs and organizations. Furthermore, if this case study were to provide evidence that those policies or practices did not support participation in student organizations, then should they be re-examined to find ways to encourage increased student participation? The theory of student involvement focuses on a student's investment in their academic experiences, boosting opportunities for involvement that result in greater opportunities for personal growth and development.

There are critics of this theory, particularly regarding perceived limitations to the framework. Some researchers argue that Astin’s theory of student involvement (1984) relies too heavily on the individual experiences of students; not incorporating the organizational perspective as well. “The institution is important to Astin’s (1984) theory, in that the effectiveness of any educational practice is directly related to the capacity of that policy or practice to increase involvement. However, the unit of analysis and focus is on the individual student, as he/she controls the extent of his/her own involvement” (Wolf-Wendel, Ward, & Kinzie, 2009).

Furthermore, critics have articulated that Astin (1984) focused too much on the traditional age student in the development of the theory. Arguing this is a limited view, and the theory should examine how to be more inclusive of all college students (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009).
Finally, there has been criticism regarding how involvement is measured. Critics argue that different researchers might measure aspects of involvement in certain ways. For example, as Wolf-Wendel et al. (2009) remarked, researchers might examine the membership of clubs and organizations and examine the number involved, whereas another researcher might examine the extent of involvement by the number of hours of participation. Causing, a variety of different approaches to examining involvement, and providing, potentially, inconsistencies.

Many scholars and practitioners continue to reference Astin’s theory (1984, 1985, & 1999) as a valid theoretical framework from which to measure their research. Astin’s theory of student involvement (1984) will be useful in helping to examine, analyze, and interpret the data collected for this research study. As stated by Case (2010), "educators have effectively leveraged research findings to foster student learning and to maximize college impact" (p.18), plus assess current institutional policies and practices relating to student involvement. In regards to student engagement, the implications of this theory are far-reaching, particularly when considering how helps to develop and expand future dimensions of higher education, including the intellectual and skill development options resulting from student organization involvement.

Through recognition and understanding of the basic claims/tenets of Astin’s (1985) theory of student involvement, it is easier to appreciate the potential impact that student organizations have on an individual’s learning capacity and personal growth. Astin's (1985) theory helps articulate the role of involvement when researching why students get involved. The theory, also, emphasizes the importance of involvement and how that may intersect with why students participate in student organizations. Astin’s theory of student involvement establishes the importance of this study, along with the structure needed to manage, successfully, the entire research process.
Conclusion

Exploring why college students decide to get involved with co-curricular activities, particularly student organizations, is key to developing a robust student organization program. It is evident that there is research focusing on the merits of student organization involvement; but relatively little discussing the reasons that students decide to join. It is crucial for educators to understand all of the components relating to student organization development. Understanding the correlations between the student, student organizations, and student engagement helps to enhance the learning environment and provide opportunities for student growth and development.

Student affairs professionals need to understand how best to strategically design and implement intentionally purposeful learning opportunities that will enhance a student’s growth and development. Resulting from this study, professionals will be equipped to learn from the “lived experiences” of students and hear directly from students why they became actively engaged in student organizations. This allows campus leaders to structure programs, services, and the allocation of resources reinforcing the importance of student organization involvement.

The next chapter includes a review of relevant literature focusing on student engagement in student organizations in a higher education setting. The chapter includes an introduction followed by a detailed 1) overview of the historical perspective of student organizations; 2) an overview of the relationship between student organizations, student involvement, and engagement; and 3) the benefits of participation in student organizations.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Student organizations have existed since the late 1800’s in the United States. The origins trace back throughout the history of higher education, appearing to fill an experiential void for students. Student organizations are an important component of higher education by contributing to student development and enhancing student learning.

In recent years, researchers explored in more depth how student organizations have provided opportunities for student growth and development. Researchers gathered specific evidence of the skills acquired by students as a result of involvement in a student organization (Dugan, 2013; Foreman & Retallick, 2012; Gellin, 2003; Kinzie & Gonyea, 2013; Kuh, 1993, 1995, 2009; Kuk, Thomas, & Banning, 2007-2008; Richmond, 1986; Smith & Chenoweth, 2015). Even more, research defines rich opportunities for learning resulting from involvement with student organizations due to their collaborative learning environment, focus on peer-to-peer interactions, and direct influence of working with a group (Astin, 1984; Cooper, Healy & Simpson, 1994; Dugan, 2013; Foreman & Retallick, 2012; Friedlander & MacDougall, 1992; Gellin, 2003; Kinzie & Gonyea, 2013; Kuh, 1993, 1995, 2009; Kuk et al., 2007-2008; Richmond, 1986; Smith & Chenoweth, 2015; Webber, Bauer Krylow & Zhang, 2013). The benefits of supporting intentionally purposeful engagement opportunities, such as participation in student organizations, exists from a professional perspective, but there is limited research on why students decide to participate in co-curricular activities. As a result, student affairs professionals are not fully equipped to address the role of student engagement relating to student organizations. This potentially minimizes the ability to inform industry best practices enhancing a culture of learning and sense of belonging.
This chapter explores how student engagement influences learning, the relationship between student engagement and involvement with student organizations, along with how each intersects with student development. Outlined in the first section of this chapter is the exploration of the history of student organizations, and how that influenced the benefits of joining collegiate clubs and organizations. Additionally, this section examines how student organizations provided students with a voice in their educational endeavors by combining curricular and co-curricular learning. Following the historical perspective, the next section pertains to the research supporting engagement with student organizations and the specific acquisition of skills, particularly, summarizing findings that support how student involvement contributes to retention initiatives and student growth. The final section of this chapter surveys the growth of student engagement and its impact on involvement, including the intersection with Astin’s theory of student involvement. Furthermore, the final section examines the potential links between curricular and co-curricular involvement, which includes an understanding of how a student’s choice to join correlates with educational high impact practices. Furthermore, how student engagement in and out of the classroom augments student success and creates a sense of belonging. Finally, this chapter concludes with a summary of the evolution of student organizations, including the contributions to student development and growth, which serve as the rationale for conducting this research study.

**Historical Perspective of Student Organization**

It is important to understand the historical background of the inception and evolution of student organizations on college campuses to help determine why students join student organizations and the relationship to student engagement. Student organizations surfaced in the early 1800’s at Oxford and Cambridge universities in England (Gallagher & Zamecnik, 2013).
During this time, higher education was expanding its role and redefining aspects of collegiate life. The development of debate societies and union debates were among the earliest of activities “teaching young men how to get on with their fellows” (Butts, 1971, p.1), and provided some of the earliest co-curricular learning opportunities, similar to today’s student organizations.

In the United States, Harvard was the first university to adopt the European model and imitate the idea of a “comprehensive club” (Butts, 1971; Jordan & Vakilian, 2013). Founded in 1880, the Harvard Union formed similarly to Oxford and Cambridge with the hopes of being more than just a debating society. (Butts, 1971). The birth of debating and literary societies were, at least in part, a result of the student union movement and the desire of creating a learning environment beyond the academic pedagogy found in the classroom (Butts, 1971). Therefore, the student union movement was integral in defining the role of student learning beyond the traditional classroom. To understand, fully, the evolution of student organizations, the next sections discuss the origins of student groups in higher education, including an exploration into the student union movement and its influence on campus organizations.

**Origins of Student Organizations**

As previously stated, the first student organizations were literary societies. These literary societies highlighted the importance that student organizations had in the development of the whole student by focusing on the exchange of ideas (Thelin, 2004; Kuk et al., 2007-2008). During this time in history, it appeared that higher education focused on how students learned, plus how co-curricular activities enhanced the growth and development of students, by taking learning beyond its traditional classroom pedagogy. Unquestionably, “the emergence of these organizations began a shift towards a more intentional look at student learning and engagement through a lens of extracurricular activities” (Culver, Ziadie, Cowherd, 2013, p.45).
Regardless of whether student organizations were social, recreational, intellectual, political, cultural, religious, professional, or for networking, no one can discount the role that literary societies and debate clubs played in defining the co-curricular experiences of higher education (Thelin, 2004; Kuk et al., 2007-2008). Today, student organizations continue to provide a learning environment for students, with hundreds of organizations to choose from, which contribute to knowledge acquisition both in and out of the classroom (Kuk et al., 2007-2008).

**Student Union Movement Influence**

Beginning at Oxford, students visualized and created the student union movement. This movement conflicted with the aspirations and educational objectives of university faculty and staff. The Oxford University Student Union was created to represent students in decision-making, higher education policy debate (hence the evolution of debating societies), and to provide services for students while getting an education (Thelin, 2004). Originally, the student union began as the student organization-gathering place; later evolving into the student union concept many higher education professionals know today (Butts, 1971; Culver et al., 2013). For the United States, it was not until the late 1800’s that American universities began to experience the emergence of the student union idea (Thelin, 2004), and saw significant growth in the co-curricular experience.

At this time, with similar experiences in Europe, most notably England, conflicts between students and administrators emerged. The student union movement gave a voice to students via their clubs and organizations, which resulted in differences, particularly regarding the priorities of collegiate life and student activities. As administrators and students struggled over the
existence of student organizations and competed for control, it became clear that student organizations were now a fabric of the higher education landscape (Thelin, 2004).

In the United States, Harvard University was the first higher education institution to explore the role of debating societies; establishing a more comprehensive approach to the union movement than what Europeans introduced (Butts, 1971). In the early 20th century, the union movement began to exist throughout the United States higher educational system. This movement provided opportunities for students to learn outside of a traditional classroom environment, and engage in purposeful activities. As the momentum for student organization development increased, college administrators, simultaneously, had provided for them an alternative method for exerting some control over the patterns of student life and interactions on college campuses (Thelin, 2004). This differed from the original secret societies and debating clubs because it allowed student affairs professional to influence the educational landscape of higher education (Jordan & Vakilian, 2013). This period set the stage for what many student affairs professionals’ roles and responsibilities are today.

The student union movement inspired student learning outside the traditional classroom. The Union was not merely just a physical structure, but became the means for developing a well-outlined plan for the “social and cultural life of the college” (Butts, 1971; Culver et al., 2013). Because of student-to-student interactions as a part of the Union plan, undergraduate students began to learn what is best for the group, how to enrich the campus community, along with, the motivation to succeed by using skills attained outside of the classroom (Dugan, 2013; Kuk et al., 2007-2008). During this time, research supported the inspiration of learning that happened, supported directly “from the records of Union committeemen in public office or places of leadership in community affairs, that this is true” (Butts, 1971). The student union movement
provided the structure for student exploration through the accumulation of skills via activities and student organization involvement, which influenced student growth and development.

Student union organizations provided a coordinated alternative to secret societies by allowing them to exert some control over the patterns of student life and interactions (Thelin, 2004). The student union played a key role in developing leadership skills, enhanced a sense of belonging, developed an understanding of citizenship, and an awareness of the social responsibility for students engaged with the Union through student organizations, plus other services and programs (Taylor & Brown, 2012; Culver et al., 2013). This movement and its organizations shaped student engagement outside of the traditional classroom and gave way for a student to learn through experiential activities and partnerships as part of their collegiate experiences (Butts, 1971).

Today, the majority of student unions in England, such as those at Cambridge and Oxford, have remained “for students, by students” with elected student officers providing a variety of services and programs for students. In the United States, many student unions moved away from the original student governance roots, professionals began to serve in key governance roles. The presence of professional staff provided a focus on union facilities and formalization of student affairs in the United States (Thelin, 2004). Whether managed by professional staff or students, the student union movement resulted in creating an environment where students put their scholarly work into actual practice (Butts, 1951; Taylor & Brown, 2012).

Presently, the student union continues to address the ever-changing and challenging needs of our educational landscape. The student union has brought a heightened awareness to cultivating the whole student, and the role that student engagement plays in the development of a student (Butts, 1971; Taylor & Brown, 2012; Culver et al., 2013). Currently, there is a variety of
different student organizations registered and/or recognized on college campuses throughout the United States typically serving as an important mechanism for creating opportunities for student learning.

**Defining Student Organizations Relationship to the Institution**

As a result of the growth of student organizations in the United States, student affairs professionals were tasked with defining the relationship between student organizations and institutions of higher education. Frequently, the focus has been on issues that student organizations faced, such as censorship, control, affiliation, and image (Kuk et al., 2007-2008). While these issues are connected to student organization development, they should not be the only factors used to outline the structure and purpose of student organizations. As Culver, Ziadie, and Cowherd (2013) point out, due to the emergence of student organizations there came a more intentional look at how student’s learn, and the impact that co-curricular engagement has on a student’s growth and development.

By the late 1960’s, the Joint Statement on Rights and Freedoms of Students (1967) was introduced, stating:

Students should be free to organize and join associations to promote their common interests. Students and student organizations should be free to examine and discuss all questions of interest to them and to express opinions publicly and privately. They should always be free to support causes by orderly means, which do not disrupt the regular and essential operations of the institution. At the same time, it should be made clear to the academic and the larger community that in their public expression or demonstrations students or student organizations speak only for themselves (Kuk et al., 2007-2008, p. 10).
Following the Statement’s unveiling; institutions used it as a guideline for supporting student organization efforts, and for conveying an understanding to their campus communities for club and organization existence and purpose (Kuk et al., 2007-2008). The Joint Statement aided in developing new policies and initiatives in support of student organizations throughout the United States. Furthermore, it helped to articulate how student organizations shape student learning while complimenting the academic core of the institution. Evidence, provided by Kuk et al. (2007-2008), suggests that peer interactions, particularly those experiences that augment academic programs, positively influence learning. The article goes on to state that interactions with one’s peers have been found to influence a student’s general cognitive growth and intellectual development; sometimes being an even greater impact than students’ in-class experiences. Moreover, Kuk et al. (2007-2008) published research, which discovered student peer interactions to be more influential than connections with faculty in regards to developing interpersonal skills, leadership skills, and overall personal development. Finally, peer-to-peer interactions with students of different racial and ethnic groups have a positive outcome on a student’s attitudes and values regarding racial-ethnic awareness and engagement (Kuk et al., 2007-2008). Most importantly, and in closing, the joint statement emphasizes the development of the “whole” student through involvement both in and out of the classroom with activities and experiences that foster opportunities for student engagement.

**Evidence of Sense of Belonging**

Research shows that student organizations are one of the key factors for developing a sense of belonging to an institution, thus providing support for an institution’s retention efforts (Dugan, 2013; Foreman & Retallick, 2012; Friedlander & MacDougall, 1992; Gellin, 2003;
Kinzie & Gonyea, 2013; Kuh, 1993, 1995, 2009; Kuk et al., 2007-2008; Richmond, 1986; Smith & Chenoweth, 2015; Webber et al., 2013). As Culver, Ziadie, and Cowherd (2013) articulated, when a student does not feel engaged with the classroom material then there is a greater likelihood that they will not persist and complete their degree. The evolution of student organizations, along with the student union movement, offered students the space to create a sense of belonging with their collegiate community, along with providing opportunities for engagement and learning. Prior to the existence of student organizations, these connections between learning and engagement were not evident (Culver et al., 2013).

Additionally, throughout the areas of this literature review, documentation and connections with sense of belonging are made. It was the evolution of the student union movement and the introduction of student organizations into the academic arena that cemented the impact that involvement with student organizations can have in enhancing a sense of belonging between students, their academic endeavors, and the institution. This is cited throughout this chapter reemphasizing the importance of student organizations in a student’s academic career.

**Conclusion**

The student union movement established the role of the student union as both a facility and concept for intellectual growth that focused on a holistic approach to developing students. By examining the evolution of student organizations, the role of the student's voice began to be heard and understood. Moreover, the student union movement provided a needed emphasis on how co-curricular opportunities do in fact further enhance student learning. The student union movement, “shows that for students to grow and develop the ability to think critically, they need
to be able to draw connections between their education and the current issues of society” (Culver et al., 2013, p. 58).

By looking through the historical landscape of student organizations, you see the importance of their evolution as part of the collegiate experience. It is important that we understand why students choose to join student organizations, if we are going to address how best to serve the educational needs now and into the future. Additionally, both historical and current day perspectives can help scholars and practitioners understand how involvement with student organizations can further promote a student’s educational and intellectual growth, further emphasizing their importance within higher education. As higher education continues to evolve, it is important to address the misunderstandings associated with student organizations learning objectives, and more firmly establish student organizations as essential elements of the learning environment.

**Benefits of Student Organizations**

Research has stated that students learn both in and outside the classroom, and that a student’s engagement with purposeful activities leads to a student’s overall success (Dugan, 2013; Foreman & Retallick, 2012; Friedlander & MacDougall, 1992; Gellin, 2003; Kinzie & Gonyea, 2013; Kuk et al., 2007-2008; Smith & Chenoweth, 2015; Webber et al., 2013). The benefits of student’s involvement with purposeful activities include a boost in confidence, increases in one’s self-esteem, an understanding of one’s self, a deepened sense of belonging to the institution and an understanding for the welfare of others (Kuh, 1993). Research has also stated that involvement with co-curricular experiences has a significant impact on a student’s cognitive development; including critical thinking skills (Terenzini, Springer, Pascarella, & Nora, 1995). Additionally, an institution’s learning environment is enhanced when there is an
ethos for valuing a holistic approach to learning and the participation of students in all facets of campus life (Kuh, 1995). In a study done by Kezar and Kinzie (2006), college and universities incorporated institutional mission with student engagement that resulted in an enhanced learning environment. The campuses participating in the study were successful because they developed programs and activities that provided enriched educational experience aligning with the institutional mission; valuing a holistic ethos (Kezar & Kinzie, 2006). Given all of these factors, participation in campus clubs and organizations is one way for students to garner the benefits of enhanced learning through a purposefully designed co-curricular activity (Case, 2011), particularly when an institution’s mission is committed to student engagement and learning.

This section explores the research on the benefits of participation in student organizations, including the assessment of cognitive growth through a student’s involvement with campus organizations. This exploration helps deepen the understanding of what students learn through involvement with one or more student organizations. For this research, cognitive skill development refers to the ability for students to gain meaning and knowledge from the experiences and information gathered through participation in certain activities and experiences with student organizations (Kuk et al., 2008) providing transferable skills.

For student affairs professionals, there seems to be a basic understanding about the benefits accomplished resulting from involvement with student organizations. This knowledge comes from the available research and day-to-day practices of student affairs practitioners. However, to further emphasize and bolster an appreciation for the role of student engagement, needed is an examination what draws a student to join student organizations from a student’s perspective. It is critical that student affairs practitioners recognize the research available on
student organization involvement and dig deeper into what data is available and what story the data tells us.

For example, in the previous section, there was a discussion on how the student union movement provided space for the evolution of student organizations. This discussion is a result of research stating how the development of the student union and student organizations assisted with educating students beyond the classroom, along with preparing students to be good citizens (Butts, 1951; Taylor & Brown, 2012; Culver et al., 2013). Research such as this underscores the importance of student organization involvement, but does not necessarily aid in determining if students are aware of the benefits of their involvement with student organizations. The student perspective on student organization involvement is needed to help identify and understand the reasons students choose to join student organizations. The student perspective combined with existing research on the benefits of student engagement enrich the learning environment.

**Classroom Learning Connections**

Higher education places a strong emphasis on the academic core of an institution, and its importance to student education. Therefore, in considering academic best practices, analyzing how involvement with student organizations supports the learning environment is critically important. With the prominence of high impact practices today, it is important to reflect on how Association of American Colleges & Universities (AAC&U) high impact practices and NSSE helped to identify the intersection of student intellectual growth with student organization involvement.

For example, the AAC&U is “committed to student success and to help practitioners and scholars alike achieve student success through developed learning outcomes. Central to their work is the belief that “work, life, and citizenship” are essential elements of education, and
cognitive skill development is a part of that learning process” (Kilgo, Ezell-Sheets, & Pascarella, 2014, p. 509). Because of this commitment and definition, it is essential for educators to discover how student organization involvement influences what a student learns in the classroom by putting it into daily practice.

While research on high impact practices focuses on the relationship between student learning and the “traditional” pedagogy, for this study, the traditional scholarly view is expanding to incorporate involvement in student organizations. By examining the connections between curricular and co-curricular activity, particularly the relationship between skill development and students choosing to join a student organization, it is important to emphasize the connection between learning in and outside of the classroom, and why each is central to student success.

Several studies have shown that student involvement in campus organizations has positive correlations with skill development and personal growth (Lundberg, 2003; Rubin, 2000; Rainey, 1995; Patrick, Niles, Maegtiak, & Cunning, 1993). According to Patterson (2012), employers primarily value competence in communication, adaptability, problem-solving and teamwork skills. Several studies highlight the empirical link between participating in student organizations and students’ development of leadership skills (Dugan, 2011; Thompson, 2006; Renn and Bilodeau, 2005). Introduction of these desired skills are part of a classroom setting but reinforced in co-curricular activities such as student organizations (Patterson, 2012) where students are able to practice what they have learned.

Activities and practices, whether it be to connect to faculty, collaboration, integrating education and experience, each are mechanisms that create engagement, and leads to learning (Kezar & Kinzie, 2006). As noted by Kuk et al. (2007-2008) student organizations are an
educational strategy for getting students actively involved with education. Given the prominence of high impact practices, NSSE and the importance of student engagement to student success, necessitates a more in-depth analysis between each practice and student organizations. The next section of this chapter provides this analysis.

**Developmental Impact of Student Involvement in Student Organizations**

Research states that student involvement in clubs and organizations has a positive relationship with student leadership and personal development. According to an article by Dugan (2013), “80% of students participate in at least one college organization by the end of their senior year. Research findings supporting this type of involvement can demonstrate positive influences on a wide array of developmental outcomes” (p. 229). Furthermore, Case (2010) outlined in her dissertation how numerous researchers explored the positive association between student development and participation in student organizations. Both of these researchers (Dugan, 2013; Case, 2011), emphasized the importance of student organizations, and the role campus organizations have in helping educate students.

Student organizations support embedding the overarching principles of student involvement into many higher education practices. As Trowler (2010) remarks, student organizations provide personal benefits to each student, while also contributing to a campus’s learning environment. Through this involvement, rewards for students include personal and professional development, which has a lasting impact on a student’s overall success.

Further showcased by Smith and Chenworth’s (2015) research, recent college graduates remarked how their leadership roles in co-curricular activities, such as student organizations, had a significant impact on their development of specific leadership skills and interpersonal abilities.
that enhanced their employment success. Hypothesizing, that involvement with student organizations supports student success both during and after college.

As Foubert and Grainger (2006) state, “it seems that involvement in student organizations has a strong association with psychosocial development, particularly on students’ establishing and clarifying purpose, educational involvement, career planning, life management, and cultural participation” (p. 180). This study (Foubert & Grainger, 2006) also unearthed evidence to support involvement in clubs and organizations during a student’s collegiate years demonstrated higher levels of learning and development (Foubert & Grainger, 2006). Upon consideration of these stated outcomes related to student development, it is evident that there are benefits to participation in student organizations for college students.

Peer Influence on Skill Development

Research also speaks to the importance of student organization participation in respects to skill development resulting from opportunities to interact and learn from one’s peers (Kuh, 1993; Kuk et al., 2008; McCormick, Kinzie & Gonyea, 2016). Evidence supports the belief that students’ interactions with their peers correlate to advances in cognitive abilities (Terenzini, Springer, Pascarella, & Nora, 1995). Student organizations provide numerous opportunities for students to interact with both peers and faculty/staff advisors. Whitt, Edison, Nora, Pascarella & Terenzini (1999) published a study indicating the more students are involved with peers both in and out of the classroom, the greater their cognitive growth during college.

Further considering the impact of peer interaction to education, engagement with student organizations is an opportunity for undergraduate students to develop cognitive skills and influence personal growth. Research by Foreman and Retalick (2012), explored the relationship between the average hours per week spent with co-curricular clubs and organizations and
leadership development, where results identified the more hours per week students spent involved in co-curricular clubs and organizations the higher those students scored on the assessment instruments used as part of the study. Additionally, the direct impact and correlation to Astin’s (1984) theory of student involvement with the Foreman and Retallick’s (2012) research, emphasizes the basic tenets of Astin’s theory.

As stated by Astin (1984), the strongest influence on cognitive development is one’s peers, and the more interaction with peers, the more promising is the achievement of desired outcomes (Foubert & Grainger, 2006). According to Foubert and Grainger (2006), Astin (1984) proposed “the power of the peer group can be found in the capacity of peers to involve each other more intensely in experiences” (p. 169). Plus, the three most powerful forms of involvement included: academic involvement, involvement with faculty, and involvement with student peer groups (Foubert & Grainger, 2006). Research (Foubert & Grainger, 2006; Kuk et al., 2008; Foreman & Retallick, 2012). This continues to highlight the relationship between involvement in student organizations and the advancement of cognitive skill development. It is vitally important to understand the influence of peers, particularly how it provides the framework for designing intentional co-curricular activities. An understanding of peer influence supports how student affairs professionals design best practices that incorporate peer interactions in student organization programs while integrating the skills necessary for a student’s development.

The implication of peer influence is critical in validating the impact that student organizations have on student development, and for consideration of why students join student organizations. Inferred, is that peer involvement influences student organizations involvement even from its earliest formations throughout history.
Conclusion

Research highlights the impact of student involvement in student organizations, particularly in regards to peer influence and cognitive development. All of this provides a critical focus needed to design best practices associated with student organization involvement. Furthermore, existing research validates the importance of incorporating peer interactions through club involvement by re-emphasizing the concepts of Astin’s theory of student involvement (1984, 1985, & 1999).

Astin’s theory of student involvement illustrates how desirable outcomes for educational institutions correlated with involvement co-curricularly (Richmond, 1986). This serves as a benefit for student organization involvement, particularly in the areas of student growth and development. Therefore, to both understand and articulate the possibilities for why students join student organizations, it is important to understand Astin’s (1984) theory and use it as a theoretical framework.

Certainly, there is a need to explore the limitations of current research further. As Dugan (2013) questioned in his research on the patterns of student involvement and student reference groups, “researchers need to investigate further the extent that a comprehensive student organization program fulfills the developmental needs of those students it serves” (p. 245). Particularly, in comparison to a student organization that might exist outside of a formalized organizational structure. For example, is there a difference in a student’s development when they are a general body member, a leader, or the founder of an organization (Foubert & Grainger, 2006).

Developing an understanding of the benefits of involvement with student organizations is essential. As student affairs professionals continue working to adopt a holistic approach to
education, the designing of a purposeful educational curriculum for students involved with student organizations is paramount to future success.

**Role of Student Engagement in Higher Education**

Today, amongst higher education professionals, student engagement is a common phrase that is continuing to serve as an important concept of an institution’s educational focus. The student union movement may not have coined the phrase, but student engagement is certainly associated with the results of the movement, particularly the growth of student organizations. It is common for higher education institutions to emphasize creating active and engaged learning environments within their academic communities.

As Axelson and Flick (2011) note, “student engagement has come to refer to how involved or interested students appear to be in their learning and how connected they are to their classes, institution, and each other” (pg. 38). Similarly, as Webber et al. (2013) articulated, whether activities are related to co-curricular activities, such as student organizations, athletics, community service, or to curricular activities, students get more out of their college experience if they invest more time and effort in those activities.

As stated by Parsons & Taylor, 2011, “student engagement has primarily and historically focused upon increasing achievement, positive behaviors, and a sense of belonging in students so they might remain in school” (pg. 4). Today, student engagement is considered a strategic process used in advancing an institution’s learning environment that is inclusive of all students (Parsons & Taylor, 2011). Many academic and higher education professionals argue that engagement is a key component of higher education’s future success (Fitzgerald, Bruns, Sonka, Furco, & Swanson, 2012), and is a benchmark for analyzing institutional success (Webber et al., 2013).
Specific to a given college or university, analyzing observations and outcomes relative to student engagement are often through a variety of different lenses. This variability can potentially affect various factors of involvement. These different perspectives include, but are not limited to, campus culture, the impact of a student’s background or economic status, and the interactions for engagement amongst students, faculty or staff (Zepke & Leach, 2010). Student engagement embraces the growth and development of a student holistically by connecting both curricular and co-curricular opportunities that prepare students for life after college. As Kuh (2009) stated,

The engagement premise is straightforward and easily understood; the more students study a subject, the more they know about it, and the more students practice and get feedback from faculty and staff members on their writing and collaborative problem solving, the deeper they come to understand what they are learning and the more adept they become at managing complexity, tolerating ambiguity, and working with people from different backgrounds or with different views (p. 5).

Moreover, Kuh (2009) suggested that engagement in a variety of educationally purposeful activities helps students to build necessary skills. These skills, such as leadership development, interpersonal skills, and social awareness, are desirable for a productive and successful life because they provide a framework for developing civically responsible citizens (Kuh, 2009).

There are a number of connections to student engagement throughout higher education history. As Axelson and Flick (2011) outlined in their article on student engagement, tracing the concept of engagement is anywhere from ten to 70 years ago. Educational psychologist, Ralph Tyler in the 1930’s conducted research examining how much time students spent on their work and its relationship to learning. In the 1980’s, Astin (1984) introduced the theory of student
involvement. Astin’s (1984) theory outlined the time invested equals the developmental and intellectual growth for a student. Additionally, Astin (1985) argued that the terms involvement and engagement are interchangeable, both with a focus on intentions and outcomes. It is obvious that there are similarities between current definitions of student engagement and Astin’s theory of student involvement.

Likewise, engagement researchers, such as Kuh (2009), have articulated similar sentiments. Kuh stated that there are relatively no differences between the terms involvement and engagement (Axelson & Flick, 2011), rather it appears they are interchangeable. Kuh (2009) argued that upon examination of the history of American higher education, identifying student engagement as the construct responsible for organizing institutional assessment, accountability, and future change is important. It would be safe to say, that student engagement has and will continue to have a tremendous impact on the future of post-secondary education and the developmental aspects of students, as well as our campus communities. Student engagement serves as a key indicator of institutional and student performance (Kuh, 2009) emphasizing the importance of providing educationally purposeful activities within our academic communities (Parsons & Taylor, 2011) and developing a sense of belonging between the student and the institution.

To highlight and emphasize the importance of student engagement in higher education, the development of an assessment tool to analyze the outcomes associated with a student’s investment in their academic journey evolved, called the National Survey on Student Engagement (NSSE). This survey serves as a mechanism for higher education institutions to assess engagement practices and experiences on their campuses purposefully focused on student learning and personal development (Kuh, 2003). NSSE is a way of thinking about collegiate
quality as well as serving as a survey administered to students (Kuh, 2003). Additionally, this survey helps to identify areas needing improvements, thus providing opportunities to develop an even stronger academic community for students, faculty, and staff.

In the following sections, the role of engagement is explored in more depth. This investigation includes examining the relationship between Astin’s theory of student involvement with student engagement; NSSE and its relationship with higher education; and an analysis of linking student organizations to engagement.

**Intersection with the Theory of Student Involvement**

Through recognition and understanding of the basic claims of Astin’s theory of student involvement, it is easier to appreciate the impact that student organizations have on student learning, personal growth, and development. This theory serves as a basis for understanding why students might participate or join student organizations, which provides an essential area of analysis for this section. This inquiry, also, includes the intersection between student organization involvement and its association with student engagement.

Astin’s theory is composed of three specific elements: inputs, environment, and outcomes (1984, 1985, & 1999). "Inputs" refer to things such as demographics, a student’s background, and any previous experiences that the student may have encountered in their lives (Astin, 1984, 1985 & 1999; Pike & Kuh, 2015). “Environment" accounts for all of the experiences a student would have during their collegiate years (Astin, 1984, 1985 & 1999). "Outcomes" describes student's characteristics, knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, and values that exist after a student has graduated college (Astin, 1984, 1985 & 1999). Beyond these three elements, Astin’s theory of student involvement has five basic claims or tenets, outlined below:
• Involvement refers to the amount of physical and psychological energy that a student devotes to the academic experience;

• Regardless of its object, involvement occurs along a continuum, that is different students manifest different degrees of involvement in different objects at different times;

• Involvement has both quantitative and qualitative features;

• The amount of student learning and personal development associated with any educational program is directly proportional to the quality and quantity of student involvement in that program;

• The effectiveness of any educational policy or practice is directly related to the capacity of that policy or practice to increase student involvement (Astin, 1999, p. 519).

Astin cultivated conclusions on student involvement based on observations of students and their inputs, outputs, and environment. Astin (1985) found that students who participated in sororities, fraternities, or almost any type of extracurricular activity were more likely to remain in college and persist; which certainly influenced retention factors.

In addition to persistence, Astin's (1985) interest in “talent development and the cultivation of educational excellence contributed to the development of the student involvement theory” (Case, 2011, p. 31). Astin interests went beyond a retention focus; he viewed the development of the student and their talents of greatest importance, and “being more comprehensive than simply developing a person's cognitive abilities” (Case, 2011, p. 31). As Richmond (1986) commented, after interviewing Astin, student involvement theory acknowledged the usefulness of developing talents and skills through a variety of different
activities and programs available to students. Astin (1985) summarized the theory of involvement in a simple statement, "students learn by becoming involved" (p. 133). This holistic perspective by Astin considered both what a student brings to the learning environment (input/output) as well as what institutions provide (environment).

The theory of student involvement centers on a student’s investment in their academic experiences; enhancing opportunities for personal growth and development. This theory emphasizes how the amount of time that a student puts into an activity combined with their level of involvement with the activity, increases the probability for a student to develop, learn, and grow (Astin, 1984, 1985, 1999; Milem & Berger, 1997; Case, 2011; Webber, Bauer Krylow, & Zhang, 2013; Zacherman & Foubert, 2014) as a result.

The theory of student involvement focuses on student behavior and motivation as a means for assessing the degree of learning and growth taking place due to involvement (Pike & Kuh, 2015). For example, when considering why students join student organizations and Astin’s theory of student involvement tenet on policy and practice, it is critical to contemplate how well institutional policies and practices support increasing involvement amongst students as a means of enticing students to join organizations. Furthermore, if those policies or practices do not support increased engagement should those policies or practices be re-examined to find ways to encourage student participation. The theory of student involvement centers on a student’s investment in their academic experiences by deepening the connection between students and their investments (Milem & Berger, 1997; Astin, 1999; Case, 2011, Webber, Bauer Krylow, & Zhang, 2013; Pike and Kuh, 2015).

Higher education leaders and educators have used the theory of student involvement as a means of leveraging the design of educationally purposeful activities, both in and outside of the
classroom, while highlighting the importance of a holistic collegiate experience (Case, 2011). In regards to student engagement, the implications of student involvement theory are far-reaching. The theory helps to develop and expand future dimensions of higher education, including the intellectual and skill development consumed as a result of a student’s investment of time and energy (Milem & Berger, 1997; Astin, 1999; Webber, Bauer Krylow, & Zhang, 2013; Zacherman & Foubert, 2014) in a given activity or experience.

Astin's (1985, 1999) theory is considered to have direct implications on the landscape of higher education. His work on explaining how involvement leads to positive learning outcomes for students has been instrumental in supporting the work of student affairs practitioners since its inception. As Case (2010) stated, this "landmark research on college students and higher education trends has assisted college and university leaders to recognize that the full spectrum of the college context holds potential for student learning and development” (p. 30). Astin saw the necessity of moving beyond content theory to finding a way to help students connect with the content through involvement (Richmond, 1986). These connections foster a sense of belonging and affinity to the institution, which in turn, supports retention initiatives and goals. Furthermore, as Astin believed (Richmond, 1986), involvement provides a common institutional focus committed to student success.

Widely used, Astin’s theory is an example of student engagement and peer group influence following student organization involvement, which provides increases in retention initiatives and student developmental growth. As noted by Webber et al. (2013) article, when students are directly involved with activities related to campus organizations, service projects in the local communities or as teaching assistants for coursework, they get more out of their college experiences. Because students have chosen to invest both time and energy into these experiences,
they are increasing opportunities to build their critical thinking skills, leadership skills, and experience cognitive growth (Kuk et al., 2007-2008; Dugan, 2013). As stated by Case (2010), “participation in campus organizations is one way for students to become purposefully involved in their educational experience” (2010, p. 19), further validating Astin’s definition of student involvement and developmental growth.

**National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE)**

The current higher education environment places a strong emphasis on fostering student learning, and hence the commitment to student engagement. Research supports that student engagement leads to high-quality learning and to the importance of student investment in their academic journey (McCormick, Gonyea & Kinzie, 2013; Trowler, 2010; Weimer, 2012).

To understand institutional perspective on student engagement, the NSSE survey benchmarks how well a college or university does on achieving stated learning outcomes and objectives. Using engagement as a direct indicator to assess the quality of undergraduate education has become the norm (Kuh, 2003). The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) assesses how an undergraduate’s collegiate experiences affect how students decide to spend their time studying and what they have learned.

NSSE is an assessment tool used by institutions to reflect on educational progress and identify areas in need of improvement. The survey examines two distinct features that influence the overall student experience by focusing on student engagement. The first feature, similar to Astin’s thoughts on involvement, assesses the amount of time that students spend on educationally purposeful activities (Webber, Bauer Krylow, & Zhang, 2013; Kinzie & Hurtado, 2017). The second feature helps institutions analyze how they manage resources, organize curriculum, and provides specific learning opportunities to enhance overall student learning.
Overall, the National Survey of Student Engagement is recognized as an effective instrument to use in higher education today; particularly when sourced to gather information about student participation in a variety of collegiate activities (Webber et al., 2013).

General practice is to administer this survey to first-year undergraduate students and students with senior year status (NSSE, 2017; Kinzie & Hurtado, 2017). As previously mentioned, the data from this survey offers an understanding for student engagement relative to a specific campus. NSSE data helps university leadership to identify where student learning is meeting the standards, plus creating avenues for needed change (Webber et al., 2013). Simply, NSSE equips colleges and universities with information about the quality of a student’s collegiate experience by providing institutions with nationally recognized information that generates actionable data items for colleges and universities to use in improving the overall student experience (Kuh, 200; Kinzie & Hurtado, 2017).

NSSE designed its survey tool around the seven “good practices” outlined by Chickering and Gamson (Kuh, 2009). Chickering and Gamson (1987) identified this list of practices to provide a high-quality environment for student learning. The list of practices are: 1. Encourages contacts between students and faculty, 2. Develops reciprocity and cooperation among students, 3. Use active learning techniques, 4. Provide prompt feedback, 5. Emphasize the importance of time on task, 6. Communicate high expectations, and 7. Respect diverse talents and ways of learning (p. 2). Each of these principles individually provides an educational impact, but when combined, the opportunities are a powerful influence on institutional learning environments (Chickering & Gamson, 1987).

The two prime objectives that have evolved as part of the NSSE survey continue to hold true today. One of the objectives is to help campus communities contemplate and discuss what
collegiate quality means and how to enhance the value of undergraduate education. Second, NSSE is a valuable tool for institutional self-assessment and improvement (Kuh, 2001).

There continues to be support for the importance of assessing engagement through the benchmarks outlined by NSSE. This tool is a useful for examining the relationship between a student and their involvement with student organizations, along with acknowledging the survey limitations. This helps researchers and higher education professionals find ways of addressing potential shortcomings in future research. As Kuh (2001) articulated, “the NSSE survey doesn’t assess student learning outcomes directly, it does provide the kind of information that every school needs to focus its efforts to improve the undergraduate experience” (p. 12). When institutions evaluate institutional data and NSSE information, they can have the greatest impact on the student experience. This information results in a holistic approach to student engagement that emphasizes student development and growth. For example, institutions are combining their NSSE results with evidence from other surveys and academic records to develop valuable, campus-specific reports about their undergraduate experiences (Kuh, 2003).

Specifically for student affairs professionals working with and supporting student organization involvement, NSSE provides information relevant to involvement with co-curricular activities, the quality of peer-to-peer relationships and the overall learning environment. NSSE data is useful for examining the level of student involvement, overall program effectiveness and the quality of services (Kinzie & Hurtado, 2017). Student affairs professionals need to develop the skills necessary for making data-informed decisions that will guide a scholar-practitioner approach in their daily work. Data, such as NSSE, supports student affairs practitioners in making improvements and identifying opportunities to collaborate with other academic peers looking to address similar concerns.
Engagement Indicators. As a means of outlining the numerous features of student engagement, the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) introduced ten engagement indicators. Engagement Indicators provide valuable information related to specific aspects of student engagement (NSSE, 2017) which provide concise, actionable items for institutions (Gonyea & Kinzie, 2015). Figure 1, outlines the structure of the four themes associated with engagement indicators along with each specific engagement indicator connected with one of the four themes. The NSSE Engagement Indicators are “summary measures based on sets of NSSE questions” (Kuh, 2003; McCormick, Gonyea, & Kinzie, 2013; NSSE, 2015; Gonyea & Kinzie, 2015; NSSE, 2017) with a focus on specific aspects of student engagement.

Figure 1. NSSE Engagement Indicators. “Adapted from ‘Taking advantage of student engagement results in student affairs.’” By J. Kinzie & S. Hurtado, 2017. New Directions for Student Services, 2017(159), 35-46.

The ten Engagement Indicators are arranged into four different themes, as follows: Academic Challenge, Learning with Peers, Experiences with Faculty, and Campus Environment. Academic Challenge centers on the importance of challenging students both intellectually and
creatively. The specific indicators associated with this theme are Higher-Order Learning, Reflective & Integrative Learning, Learning Strategies, and Quantitative Reasoning. The Learning with Peers theme centers on helping students understand the importance of collaboration in mastering the difficult and challenging material. This theme focuses on the analysis of how students develop interpersonal and social competence to manage, effectively, the multiple complexities of our global world both during and after college. Specifically, there are two engagement indicators associated with this theme: Collaborative Learning and Discussions with Diverse Others. The third theme, Experiences with Faculty, focuses on how interactions with faculty members influence a student’s learning environment inside and outside of the classroom. The engagement indicators associated with this theme, include Student-Faculty Interaction and Effective Teaching Practices. The final theme, Campus Environment, centers on the benefits for students when they are members of a supportive environment that encourages and cultivates positive relationships amongst members of the campus community (Harper & Quaye, 2009; Gonyea & Kinzie, 2015). There are two specific indicators for this theme: Quality of Interactions and Supportive Environment. Figure 2 defines each of the Engagement Indicators for NSSE, while providing a deeper understanding of each.

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<th>NSSE Engagement Indicators Defined</th>
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<td><strong>Engagement Indicator</strong></td>
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<td>Quantitative Reasoning</td>
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<td>Collaborative Learning</td>
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<td>Effective Teaching Practices</td>
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<td>Quality of Interactions</td>
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<td>Supportive Environment</td>
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*Figure 2. NSSE Engagement Indicators Defined. Adapted from “Refreshing engagement: NSSE at 13.” by A. McCormick, R. Gonyea, & J. Kinzie, 2013. Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning, 45(3), 6-15.*

The NSSE engagement indicators provide structured themes that help higher education professionals make data-informed decisions to improve the overall quality of the student experience. As institutional accountability is regularly analyzed; it is important that
professionals use data, such as NSSE and its engagement indicators, to make continuous improvements (McCormick, Gonyea, & Kinzie, 2013; Kinzie & Hurtado, 2017) and informed decisions. The NSSE survey helps institutions analyze how involvement in co-curricular activities, such as student organizations, influences student success, while providing an opportunity to identify gaps in programs and services (Kuh, 2003; Trowler, 2010; Kinzie & Hurtado, 2017; NSSE, 2017). As mentioned by McCormick (2011), NSSE data informs practices for many academic and student services departments, particularly, areas such as academic affairs, career services, and student activities.

Today, senior-level professionals in higher education value the data collected via the NSSE survey. As a result, NSSE is identified as a valid, and useful, instrument for assessing engagement at the institutional level. While many researchers believe in the value of this tool, others argue that NSSE only analyzes the behavioral aspects of student engagement, and does not provide an assessment of actual student learning (Schneider, 2009). Given that assessment, NSSE appears to have potential limitations for understanding what engagement entails, particularly in a university setting (Kahu, 2013) on both a national level and amongst different types of institutions (Kuh, 2001; Schneider, 2009). Even with potential flaws, NSSE can still serve as a roadmap for understanding the role of student engagement in higher education; it has also provided an opportunity for collaboration with other data sources. This collaboration strengthens the role of institutional accountability for student learning (Kuh, 2003). NSSE, minimally, as Kuh (2003) states, is an assessment measure focused on helping colleges and universities navigate the role of student engagement. Specifically, by determining if student behaviors and institutional practices are effective and correlate to positive educational learning opportunities.
**High Impact Practices Connections.** In addition to Engagement Indicators, the National Survey for Student Engagement (NSSE), shares how the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) high-impact practices (HIPs) aids in increasing levels of student learning and retention at institutions of higher education (Kilgo, Sheets & Pascarella, 2014; Zacherman & Foubert, 2014; Gonyea & Kinzie, 2015). High-Impact Practices (HIPs) represent enriching educational experiences that define the essence of educationally purposeful activities.

Research has articulated, that HIPs require a substantial commitment of both time and effort in and outside of the classroom, regularly interact with both educators and peers, are accustomed to regular feedback, and apply what has been learned (Kuh, 2008; McCormick, Gonyea & Kinzie, 2013; Gonyea & Kinzie, 2015; Quaye & Harper, 2015; NSSE, 2017). As result of participation in at least one HIP, evidence proclaims there is developmental growth for students, along with the achievement of specific learning outcomes (Kuh, 2008, 2009 & Quaye & Harper, 2015). For example, students engaging in learning communities are more often involved with other elements of collegiate life than those students who are not members of a specific learning community (Kuh, 2009). Furthermore, Kuh (2009) surmised that students who participate in college activities, such as working on campus, participating in a student organization, serving on a campus committee, or playing intercollegiate athletics, are introduced to specific learning opportunities due to their investment of time and effort in the activity (Kilgo, Sheets, & Pascarella, 2014). Identifiable learning outcomes associated with co-curricular student involvement typically ensures improved communication, interpersonal, and leadership skills (Kuh, 2009) for students.
Based on recommendations from NSSE and AAC&U, a large number of institutions have adopted many, if not all, of the recommended ten high impact practices. Identification of the ten high impact practices is as follows:

- First-year seminars and experiences,
- Common intellectual experiences,
- Learning communities,
- Writing Intensive Courses,
- Active and Collaborative learning,
- Undergraduate research,
- Diversity/Global learning,
- Service learning,
- Internships,
- Capstone courses and projects (Kilgo et al., 2014).

Each of these experiences supports student growth and development while providing the essential mechanics for educating students. Moreover, the academic environment is further enhanced by a student’s involvement with out of the classroom activities; serving to augment student learning and the role of high impact practices. For example, the educational objectives outlined in the next section for the HIP active and collaborative learning provides a holistic educational approach when professionals combine in and out of classroom experiences, such as student organization involvement.

A study, by Kilgo et al. (2104), suggested that “active and collaborative learning, as well as undergraduate research, had broad-reaching positive effects across multiple liberal arts learning outcomes, such as critical thinking, need for cognition, and intercultural effectiveness”
This correlates with Astin’s findings on peer group influence in his theory of student involvement. Moreover, both collaborative learning and peer group involvement have positive outcomes on cognitive skill development and elements found in the traditional academic classroom environment and student organization involvement.

Some scholars argue that high impact practices were only meant for the classroom environment, there is evidence, however, that HIPs can and do apply to student learning outside of the classroom. Specifically, Kuh (2009) suggests that active and collaborative learning improves student learning outcome achievement when students are actively involved in their education, particularly when students are encouraged to think about what they are learning in different settings and contexts. As mentioned by researchers working with NSSE and with HIPs, when students collaborate with peers to address problems or to master challenging situations they are prepared to address the “messy, unscripted problems they will encounter daily during and after college” (Kuh, 2009, p. 700). Again, this emphasizes how high impact practices provide a framework for developing a learning environment that includes curricular and co-curricular experiences.

Furthermore, the definition of the HIP active and collaborative learning directly correlates to student engagement, including active participation in student organizations. For example, in student organization involvement, students will develop and practice the following: how to manage conflict, how to formulate a plan for addressing complications, how to work collaboratively to tackle problems, and how to find solutions for necessary changes. Overall, this high impact practice enhances involvement in student organizations by providing an opportunity to align classroom pedagogy with student experiences outside of the classroom. The definition of active and collaborative learning bears a striking resemblance to the principles
found in Astin’s theory of student involvement (Astin, 1984, Kuh, 2009). From this definition, one could determine that skill development, plus the influences of peers is a direct result of involvement in student organizations, ultimately further integrating a sense of belonging, and aligning with high impact practices. Additionally, though, a direct correlation linking student organization involvement with high impact practices calls for further investment to confidently “label” the activity high impact (Quaye & Harper, 2014).

Utilizing high impact practices and NSSE Engagement Indicators showcases, the positive impact student development creates between academic and student affairs. The combination of efforts in student learning further develops opportunities for our students to grow, learn and apply the knowledge they have acquired. The strength of this is recognized in the study done by Gellin (2003), where he inferred that involvement in student organizations affects academic learning and enhances the academic values of the institution. The evidence provided in this study, following observations of critical thinking skills obtained because of student involvement with clubs and organizations, influenced how these opportunities supported excelling in student coursework. Co-curricular activities, such as student organizations, enrich a student’s academic experiences and provide learning.

Nevertheless, if we consider aspects of Astin’s theory of student involvement jointly with high impact practices, there is an opportunity to increase the impact on student learning and emphasize the importance of scholarly efforts both in and out of the classroom. However, there are also some identifiable limitations to these assumptions. To begin, not everyone believes in the philosophical perspective that learning takes place both in and outside of the classroom. There is limited research available to prove that active and collaborative learning is not exclusive to a classroom setting, however, changing the historical and contextual perspectives amongst
some academics are likely to be challenging. High impact practices have not been widely defined for co-curricular activities such as student organizations or fully supported by members of the faculty communities, therefore possibly providing additional problems for acceptance of their use in settings outside the classroom. While the definitions, in many cases, appear applicable, a universal definition by, or for, the full scope of learning experiences in higher education have not been labeled as a high impact practice (Quaye & Harper, 2014).

Conclusion

Higher education, due to the increased demands on accountability and student learning, has embedded student engagement into the framework of the collegiate experience at a majority of colleges and universities across the United States. As Trowler (2010) articulated, “student engagement is concerned with the extent to which students are engaging in a range of educational activities that research has shown as likely to lead to high-quality learning” (p. 9), and that students become active consumers in their learning environments (Astin, 1984; Kuh, 2003, 2009; Foubert & Zacherman, 2014; Kinzie & Hurtado, 2017). Furthermore, student engagement serves to impact student success by not being limited only to the academic core of the institution, but, rather, by incorporating the out of the classroom experiences; fostering learning beyond traditional pedagogy (Zacherman & Foubert, 2014).

With this increased demand, there has been a drive to make data-informed decisions about student success, which has resulted in instruments such as NSSE. Today, higher education remains surrounded by the need to provide evidence of an effective learning environment (Zacherman & Foubert, 2014; Kinzie & Hurtado, 2017), a focus that is unlikely to change anytime soon. Consequently, higher education needs to incorporate using data to make improvements and inform best practices.
Furthermore, concerning student organization development and its relationship with student engagement, the emphasis on student affairs professionals to understand and develop their assessment skills is a necessity (Kuk et al., 2007-2008; Kinzie & Hurtado, 2017). Student engagement serves an impetus for collaborating with academic affairs, and examining how HIPs compliments co-curricular practices. Finally, data, such as NSSE, provides the context needed for colleges and universities to design an intentionally purposeful programs and activities; with the ultimate goal being student success (Kinzie & Hurtado, 2017).

In conclusion, there is ample research to support the role of student engagement as an effective measure of student success in the educational environment (Kinzie & Hurtado, 2017). The amount of time and energy that a student puts into an activity serves as a potential indicator of success. Ultimately, it is the responsibility of higher education professionals to design educational approaches, which motivates students to participate in purposeful activities supporting their future success.

**Summary**

The literature review for this study explored the evolution of student organizations, the role of student engagement with involvement, and highlighted research outlining the benefits of participation in student organizations. Ultimately, student organizations are a major component of higher education best practices; serving to augment traditional classroom experiences.

The student union movement assisted with introducing student organizations into colleges and universities, along with the emergence of literary and debating societies in Europe. Student organizations, in both Europe and the United States, allowed students to put their academic knowledge to practice by further developing skills outside the classroom. During this time, students began to connect with being actively involved in the educational processes both in
and out of the classroom. Additionally, student organizations began to help students find their voice to influence future educational directions; particularly when it resulted in enhancing a future professional practice. This time provided a strategic focus on the importance of co-curricular activities; allowing one’s academic journey to include learning opportunities outside traditional pedagogy.

After introducing student organizations to higher education practice, opportunities evolved showcasing how a student’s involvement led to increased personal and professional development. Astin’s (1984) theory of student involvement provided a conceptual framework for higher education professionals to employ when outlining the best ways to develop, maintain, and implement a comprehensive student organization program. Understanding the role of involvement was important, especially given higher education’s focus on providing a strong learning environment. Involvement is a central concept found in research articulating the benefits for participating in student organizations. However, this understanding of the benefits, while extremely important, is only one piece of a holistic, comprehensive approach to developing a student organization program aimed on student growth and development.

Consequently, also needed, is an understanding of what motivates a student to join. For student affairs professionals focused on cultivating and adopting best practices related to the advancement of strong student organization programs this is an essential component of a comprehensive approach.

Higher education professionals need to bridge curricular and co-curricular experiences by providing a more centralized effort to enhance the overall academic experience for students. As has been outlined in this literature review, there is an abundance of research on student engagement and its impact both in and outside of the classroom, and its relationship to student
success. This research helps to inform student affairs professionals in making informed
decisions, plus possibilities to identify areas needing improvement. Student engagement
research emphasizes the need for student affairs professionals to cultivate their assessment skills,
so that data such as NSSE, has an impact on a student’s educational experience and success.

Research, today, needs to assist with how best to integrate participation with student
organizations into the academic core of the institution. It is critical that scholars and practitioners
analyze the associations between the student, involvement with student organizations, impact on
sense of belonging and the influence on academic curriculum. Ultimately, this provides a needed
holistic approach to education.

In the end, supporting student aspirations and goals is critical. Higher education
professionals need to provide students with activities and experiences that connect them to an
institution, thus creating a sense of belonging where students are encouraged to learn, preparing
them for life after college. This study intends to explore, from the student’s experience, why
they choose to join student organizations. This study will assist student affairs professionals in
designing effective and comprehensive student organization programs focused on enhancing the
student-learning environment, and supporting the overall academic mission.
Chapter 3: Research Design

This study seeks to learn about why college students decide to get involved with co-curricular activities, particularly student organizations. By understanding what motivates students towards involvement with student organizations, student affairs professionals, in particular, are then equipped with the knowledge needed for developing a robust and comprehensive student organization program on their respective college campuses. In consideration of involvement with student organizations, it is imperative that educators strategically design purposeful and educational opportunities focusing on student learning; ultimately enhancing a student’s growth and development. By learning, more about the “lived experiences” of students actively engaged in student organizations, this study assists campus leaders with the data needed to make informed decisions affecting the educational environment. Allowing, also, student affairs professionals to structure programs, services, and the allocation of resources reinforcing the importance of engagement with student organizations.

This study explores how students involved with student organizations define their reasons for involvement, and how such involvement has influenced their collegiate experience(s). The primary research question for this study is why do students join student organizations? Research is readily available in defining the benefits for participation in student organizations (Dugan, 2013; Friedlander & MacDougall, 1992; Gellin, 2003; Kuh, 1993, 1995, 2009; Kuk, Thomas & Banning, 2008; Richmond, 1986; Smith & Chenoweth, 2015), but the question, also is, why do students decide to participate, and what is a student’s understanding of the value of participation, as a result of involvement with one or more student organizations.

In the first section of this chapter, the researcher affirms the use of a qualitative research approach and the decision to use case study methodology. Additionally, the researcher examines
the intersection between a qualitative approach and case study methodology influenced by the constructivist-interpretivist research paradigm. In the following sections, the researcher provides a detailed overview of the study’s participants and a discussion on the procedures followed for data collection and analysis. In the final section, the researcher aligns the study’s procedures with the criteria outlined as desirable for a qualitative research approach, which includes credibility, ethical considerations, transferability, transparency, positionality and, finally, identifying the limitations of the study.

Qualitative Research Approach

There is considerable research available, particularly from a quantitative perspective about student involvement, particularly with the emergence of NSSE, with student organizations (Dugan, 2013; Friedlander & MacDougall, 1992; Gellin, 2003; Kuh, 1993,1995, 2009; Kuk et al., 2008; Richmond, 1986; Smith & Chenoweth, 2015). Now, it is time for higher education professionals to contribute to this research by investigating, from a student’s own experiences and perspectives, their rationale for involvement with student organizations.

Creswell (2013) explains that qualitative research allows study participants to tell their own story, while providing an opportunity for researchers to delve into a specific research focus, and develop a thorough understanding of the issue under examination. Additionally, as Ponterotto (2005) referenced, qualitative approaches gather data directly from the lived experiences of the research participants, and are presented in common, everyday language by incorporating an individual’s own words. For each of the reasons above, employing a qualitative approach was essential for this study, because learning about why a student is interested in student organizations directly from them and in their own words is important.

The constructivist-interpretive research paradigm guided this study by focusing on the individual views and meaning of the lived social interaction (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). An in-
depth exploration of the relationship between a student and their reason for joining a student organization creates a definition of the situation reflected by the social reality through the perceptions of the individuals experiencing it. Burrell and Morgan (1979) describe this process of exploring perceptions as getting inside the phenomena to create understanding. For researchers, it is helpful to understand the decision to join student organizations from students experiencing it (Butin, 2010; Ponterotto, 2005). The constructivist-interpretive paradigm holds that there are no absolutes, only multiple, complex interpretations of reality (Creswell, 2013), where the researcher is directly involved in the data collection.

Moreover, this approach allows the researcher to hear, understand, and define a student’s rationale for participation in a student organization. Concerning this research focus, it is critically important to understand a student’s own lived experiences and motivations, further validating the logic for incorporating a constructivist-interpretivist approach. Realistically, this study requires a tactic that develops meaning for those students involved, and by employing a constructivist-interpretive approach, fulfilling the basic research need. This research sought to understand why college students decide to get involved with student organizations, and how the existence of current student organization programs and the institutional approaches for encouraging involvement influenced student development and success (Lauckner, Paterson, & Krupa, 2012). Because this research paradigm seeks to incorporate a subjective approach, this also adds value to understanding student involvement with student organizations from a variety of diverse participants (Laukner et al., 2012). The data collected in this study equips both scholars and practitioners with a deeper understanding of how to design opportunities for co-curricular involvement, such as student organizations.
Research Tradition: Case Study

As expressed by Baxter and Jack (2008), as a methodology, qualitative case studies provide an avenue for exploring an issue within its own specific context, while simultaneously using a variety of data sources as part of the exploratory process. By utilizing different data sources to examine an issue, case study methodology analyzes the subject from multiple perspectives, which heightens the awareness of the topic under study. Throughout this section, is an exploration into the history of case study methodological, an overview of its key scholars, and how case study methodology, specifically, aligns with this study’s research focus.

In the beginning, case studies originated from a quantitative analysis perspective, but as the research methodology evolved, the focus included qualitative, inductive approaches. Case study methodology provides researchers with an opportunity to look at a specific phenomenon within its context (Yin, 2009, Stake, 1995; Merriam, 1998) and draw conclusions. Yin (2009) notes that case study methodology is preferred when a researcher is attempting to seek answers to questions of how and why. Furthermore, a case study approach is, also, a useful tool for developing theory, evaluating programs or services, and for establishing new approaches to best practices (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Specifically, this research study is an evaluation of the student organization program at the subject university; providing further validation for utilizing a case study approach.

For this research design, Creswell (2012) articulated specific defining elements of a case study approach, which include: 1. identifying a specific issue; 2. being intrinsic or instrumental; 3. involving a single or multiple cases; 4. an in-depth understanding of an issue; 5. a detailed description of the phenomenon under investigation; and 6. ending with the researcher forming a conclusion about the data collected (p. 98). Furthermore, the themes and patterns, which
emerged, are organized in a chronological order allowing the researcher to present conclusions that speak to a comprehensive meaning of the case (Skate, 1995).

In the next section, three seminal authors, held in high regard of case study methodology, are explored. Each author is affiliated with the field of education, thus helping to further define how this methodology specifically aligns with the research question of this study.

**Key Scholars of Case Study Methodology**

As Yazan (2015) stated, three seminal scholars of case study methodology, particularly within the field of education, include Yin (1994, 2009, 2013), Stake (1995) and Merriam (1988, 1998). The next three paragraphs provide summaries of these scholars, including their interpretations of case study research.

**Yin.** In regards to case study methodology, Yin (1995) is a well-known researcher associated with this specific qualitative approach. Yin applied experimental logic to the naturalistic inquiry, and blended this with qualitative methods, further bridging the methodological gap and strengthening the methodological quality of case study research (Harrison, Birks, Franklin, & Mills, 2017, p. 1). All of this work is done in the real-life context of the case.

Around the 1970’s, the field of education embraced case study as a methodology, utilizing it to evaluate curriculum design and other aspects of education (Harrison et al., 2017). Case studies provided an avenue to gather evidence from an individual’s perspectives, while also using other data sources to collect information. For instance, case studies methodology provides significant evidence that directly influenced educational policies and best practices.

**Stake.** As outlined by Harrison et al. (2017), Stake (1995) was an educational psychologist who adopted a constructivist alignment to case study methodology. This approach,
for Stake (1995), emphasized an inductive approach utilizing thick descriptions of the case during all stages of the study and analysis. Stake (1995) stated that there were three types of case study’s just as Yin (1994, 2009, 2013) had, defining his as: intrinsic, instrumental, and collective. Additionally, both Stake (1995) and Merriam (1988, 1998) were considered major contributors to education via use of the case study methodology.

Merriam. Finally, Merriam (1988, 1998) emphasized the need to both define and understand a case(s) through inquiry, and used elements from both Yin (1994, 2009, 2013) and Stake’s (1995) work (Harrison et al., 2017). Each of these characteristics focused on a specific entity that researchers were motivated to understand better and analyze the findings to inform educational practice. Moreover, Merriam emphasized the importance of using theoretical frameworks to guide the research process of the case study in regards to organization, data collection and management of analysis (Harrison et al., 2017).

The use of case study methodology is an effective and valid research approach. Case study methodology has evolved over the years and considered a relevant form of research methodology for many researchers (Creswell, 2012; Harrison et al., 2017). Researchers who chose to use this methodology need to remember to incorporate the key elements of a case study, particularly to address questions of validity and reliability.

Notably, case study methodology supports the inclusion of different components, such as interview data, observations, and review of supplemental materials relative to the case or issue under study. This provides a holistic analysis of the data pertaining to the research question. In the end, this approach offers multiple data sources, helping to make well-informed decisions that provide answers for the how and why of the topic being studied.
Methodological Alignment with Research Focus

Use of a qualitative case study facilitates the exploration of student involvement with student organizations within its specific environment at a public institution located in Western, NY. The approach allows for the use of a variety of data sources, exploring involvement with student organizations from a range of perspectives (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

This case study incorporated specific data points beyond focus group interviews with students, which included a review of programs, such as New Student Orientation and the campus’s student organization recruitment event, NSSE data specific to the subject university, and information from the student organization management software, Engage. As a program, the student organization recruitment event provides over 130 student organizations, including club sports, fraternities and sororities, and student government clubs, highlighting their organizations and recruiting new members. For this study, each of the programs (New Student Orientation and student organization recruitment event) serves to investigate how the programmatic intent of the activities intersect with involvement in student organizations. Subsequently, the data sources within the institution’s student organization management software were also analyzed, specifically historical participation rates. In addition, institutional data from NSSE was reviewed. Institutions can use the institutional data gathered from NSSE to identify aspects of a student’s experience, both in and outside of the classroom, related to student engagement (NSSE, 2018). The data will help to pinpoint areas needing improvement related to student engagement and student organization involvement. Furthermore, all of these data sources provide the scope of details needed to address the research problem and analyze it from a wider landscape, thus aligning with case study methodology.
The primary research question for this study asks why students join student organizations. Specifically, this research question aligns with elements outlined by Yin (1994, 2009, 2013), Stake (1995), Merriam (1998) and Creswell (2012), as necessary components of case study research. Moreover, following the review of case study methodology definitions, this study unequivocally supports the use of this research practice.

As further evidence, Merriam’s (1998) described case study research, as a process focuses on holistic definition of the phenomenon, unit of analysis, and case examined, signifies the application of this methodology for this specific research study. Additionally, through the characteristics of case study methodology, as defined by Merriam (1998), particularistic, descriptive, and heuristic, this study focuses on uncovering why students join student organizations, thus providing data to assist in answering the study’s research question. As indicated by Merriam (1998), case study methodology is useful in examining educational processes and programs to deepen an understanding of those phenomenons, and assist with making improvements in practice. This definition provided by Merriam (1998) gets to the core of what this study seeks to analyze, understand, and use to improve institutional programs and practices related to student organization involvement.

**How Case Study Methodology Shaped the Study**

**Data Collection.** There are specific themes that have evolved from researchers, such as Yin (1994, 2009, 2013), Stake (1995), and Merriam (1988, 1998), about the best formats for collecting data using a case study methodology. Yin (1994, 2009, 2013) suggested three specific principles for collection data: 1. utilizing multiple sources of data by creating a triangulation of evidence that increases the reliability of the data and the process for gathering it; 2. creating a case study database that incorporates the data collected in an organized, logical manner, plus
including reports from the investigator; and 3. maintaining a chain of evidence that increases, again, the reliability of the study (Tellis, 1997). As Stake (1995), Yin (1994, 2009, 2013), and Merriam (1988, 1998) have stated, accomplishing data collection through direct observations, interviews, archival records, topic-related documents, and physical artifacts is paramount to conducting a valid case study approach.

This study has one sole researcher for the data collection process. The first phase of the study included a pilot interview with one participant to test the interview questions and the established research protocols. As Creswell (2012) outlined, conducting pilot interviews are a helpful component of the data collection process for determining the effectiveness of research questions and interviews protocols. The researcher found this a helpful component of the interview process for the study.

The second phase of the study involved the collection of all relevant information from the identified data sources. Including, a review of institutional documents, programs, and software information about student organization involvement. As Merriam (2009) indicated, for case study methodology, documents are identified as useful research materials that help to provide meaning and understanding for the specific research study. As Yin (2009) suggests, multiple forms of data collection is an important component of case study research and further strengthens its methodological approach. Moreover, by incorporating a more multi-dimensional approach to the research study, the validity and strength of the research are increased (Yin, 2014).

Following the conclusion of the pilot study and collection of data from identified sources, finalizing the completion of the third phase was implemented. This phase included focus groups with each of the identified student organization areas (club sports, fraternities/sororities, or academic, fine arts, service or cultural councils). Questions for the focus groups were developed
based on Astin’s inputs-outputs-environment model, which are the core concepts of his theory of student involvement (1984, 1985, 1999), and serves as the theoretical framework for this study.

The focus group interviews took place on the campus of the subject institution. The locality of each interview was in a neutral location that was easily accessible for focus group participants. The interviews lasted 30 to 60 minutes in length. To accomplish a sense of clarity and to minimize inaccuracies, each interview was digitally recorded. The digital recordings were stored in a file on the researcher’s computer.

The final phase of data collection included transcribing each of the focus group interviews using an online transcription service and gathering the researcher’s observational field notes from each group of interviews. The researcher compiled the field notes immediately following each interview to maintain accuracy and to provide a solid account of what transpired. Following the completion of transcription, participants were emailed a copy of the focus group discussions to review for accuracy.

Lastly, the data collected was stored in both printed and digital formats. All printed copies, including participant consent forms, were stored in a locked file in the researcher’s office, kept for a minimum of six months following the completion of the study. All digital copies relevant to the study were stored on the researcher’s computer. These digital copies were stored for a minimum of six months following the completion of the study. Following the official completion of the study, printed materials were shredded, and digital copies were deleted.

**Data Analysis.** Qualitative research analysis includes an organization of the information and materials acquired into common themes and interpretations through a process of coding and then producing a final representation of the data collected as noted by Creswell (2012). Given
this analysis design, the researcher conducted a multi-step approach to analyzing the raw data gathered during this research study by using an inductive approach. Given that this research focuses on learning about why students decide to participate in student organizations; the use of an inductive approach allowed themes to surface organically, and not be riddled by preconceived notions or biases.

The organization of the data is extremely important when utilizing inductive analysis techniques (Creswell, 2012). Therefore, employed in this study were three specific forms of coding: memoing, in-vivo, and values (Miles, Huberman and Saldana 2014), each guiding the development of themes. Memoing serves as a good analytic tactic for qualitative research and an opportunity to aid a researcher in categorizing the data collected into specific conceptual ideas and points of view (Miles et al., 2014). For this study, each of the transcripts was reviewed several times before adding reflective notes to the margins that would help to identify conceptual ideas and themes.

Following memoing, the implementation of in-vivo coding was introduced as part of the analysis process. In-vivo coding is one of the most widely used forms of data analysis, focusing on the identification of words or phrases that re-occur throughout the data that may highlight commonalities or specific patterns in the data (Miles et al., 2014). Specifically, the researcher used in-vivo coding to assist with the identification of common words or phrases throughout the data collected to help with the evolvement of specific themes and concepts.

Finally, the researcher incorporated values coding for analysis of the data. This type of coding assesses a participant's values, attitudes, and beliefs, representing his or her perspectives or worldview (Miles et al., 2014). Values coding was used to assess patterns related to participant attitudes and beliefs relevant to involvement with student organizations. Overall,
each of these coding processes were introduced to examine the themes that emerged but to also move beyond the themes to explore an even deeper meaning of the data against the literature directly related to student organizations.

**Data Triangulation.** The researcher employed the concept of triangulation for gathering information and data from multiple sources (Carter, Bryant-Lukosius, DiCenso, Blythe, and Neville, 2014). Furthermore, analyzing documentation relevant to current institutional initiatives promoting student organization involvement is a critical component of the study, including the most recent institutional data from the NSSE survey and the institution’s student organization software. In addition to NSSE and the student organization software, specific institutional student programs incorporate the role of engagement into certain programmatic practices, having direct links encouraging involvement with student organizations, such as New Student Orientation. All of these elements, along with focus group interviews, when triangulated, provide a full perspective on student involvement at the subject university.

For data sources related to this study, specific documentation associated with New Student Orientation provides an analytic review of how the institution potentially impacts a student’s decision to get involved with student organizations as a result of discussions incorporated into the two-day New Student Orientation program. Additionally, following New Student Orientation participants are surveyed to gain feedback this specific institutional program. Results of these surveys are definite data sources for this research study to gain an understanding of a student’s decision to participate in a student organization. Certainly, as a part of this study, it is important to create an understanding of how that program potentially influences student organization involvement.
Beyond that, the reports and documentation directly linked with the student organization management software, *Engage*, were analyzed and studied. The information through the software system provides context for who uses the management tool, and how often. Furthermore, participation rates in student organizations were analyzed via *Engage* to learn what particular student organizations students are joining. This analysis via the software provides further perspective on the connections between the student and student organization. Overall, the documentation provides corroborating evidence that is useful when adopting a case study methodological approach (Yin, 2013).

In addition to a review of documents and software data related to influencing student organization involvement, observations were a tactic used as part of the methodological approach for this case study. As Yin (2013) remarks, observations can serve as a useful tool in providing additional information relevant to the research topic being examined, particularly due to a constructivist-interpretivist approach that includes the researcher perspective. Specifically, researcher observations were conducted during the club and organization fair held each semester.

To augment the analysis of reports, documentation, and observations, focus group interviews collected data highlighting a student’s own lived experience with respects to involvement with student organizations. As Yin (2013) states, interviews serve as one of the most important sources of data collection for a case study. As Krueger & Casey (2001) explain, focus groups help to provide an understanding of how participants think or feel and correlate to the constructivist-interpretivist approach. Additionally, focus groups have specific characteristics that make it a worthwhile approach for data collection in this study, which are recruitment of participants, opportunity to provide a more relaxed environment for interaction with participants, a knowledgeable facilitator and a structured analysis of the data collected that
is evident in the reporting phase of the study (Krueger & Casey, 2001). The questions used during the focus group directly relate to gathering information specifically correlating to the stated research question and theoretical framework. This data triangulation provides an in-depth understanding of the case; further validating the study’s results.

**Presentation of Findings.** Upon reflection of the final stage of qualitative research, it is particularly important to understand who your audience is, their interest in the research topic, and the trustworthiness infused into the design and application of the study. Essentially, as the researcher, it is important to consider the relevance of the data to the defined audience, and how best to present the details (Yin, 1994; Darke, Shanks, & Broadbent, 1998) in a clear, credible, and valid format that ensures a sense of trust.

As Yin (2014) indicated, case study conclusions, whether in writing or shared verbally, emphasize the study’s findings and brings the results to a closure. Overall, the presentation of findings for a case study should be complete and have identifiable evidence to support the findings. It may be helpful for researchers utilizing the case study methodology to include tables, graphs, and visual elements highlighting the evidence. Furthermore, as Drake et al. (1998) concluded, the goal when presenting case study findings is to adopt a clear and articulate writing style that provides concrete evidence proving what has been found. Therefore, it was imperative to consider how, as the researcher, the story relays the lived experiences of the research participants; creates awareness on how that aligns with the literature; and assess how to impact student organization best practices based on the data.

This case study supports the collection of evidence from multiple sources to help substantiate the findings (Yin, 2014). Each of the data collection procedures provides the
necessary information for developing an in-depth understanding of why students engage in student organizations and are essential to this study’s overall credibility.

**Study Participants**

The selection of participants for this study was from a purposeful sampling of students between the ages of 18 – 25. This purposeful sampling included a verification process with the subject institution’s student organization software system, Engage; to confirm that study participants were current members of a registered club or organization. Likewise, student participants held membership in one of the key student organization councils outlined in previous chapters, which are club sports, fraternities/sororities, academic council, fine arts council, cultural council and service council.

The students participating in the study were from a variety of different backgrounds, ethnicities, cultures, and interests. Table 1 is an overview of study participants which outlines each of the 20 students involved with the focus group interviews, their class standing at the time of the interview, and which student organization council they represented, plus their identified ethnicity. To maintain confidentiality, each student participant has a pseudonym. To establish an environment during the focus groups that was open, inclusive and reliable, the use of pseudonyms emphasized that importance with participants.

Provided in the next section is a summary of each participant, including their student organization involvement, class year, student employment status on campus and one of six identified geographic locations (New York City/Long Island, Downstate, Albany Region, Central NY, Western NY, and out of state/country) they grew up in. The narrative description, also outlined in a graph format in Table 1, offers background information on those involved with the focus group aspect of the study as part of data source.
Overview of Participants

Demographics. Of the 20 interview participants, 16 identified as female and four identified as male. All participants were between the ages of 18 – 25, three freshman, two sophomore, seven juniors, six seniors, and two graduate students. Table 1 outlines the demographic information, including participant name, student organization council involvement, class year, ethnicity, on campus student employment status, and religion (where identified), for all 20 participants.

Student Organization Area of Participation. Following the verification of age for the study through Engage, interviewers prompted students to reflect on their undergraduate student experiences with student organizations for the purpose of the focus group discussions. In regards to the student organization areas or councils recognized for this study, at least one participants was identified. Many of the participants were involved in more than one council, therefore resulting in a larger representation for each then overall student participants. The breakdown is as follows: three Fraternity & Sorority Life groups; six Club Sports; six Service groups; two Fine Arts organizations and five Academic clubs. Each of the participants was active in their organizations with seven serving as President, two as Vice President, six as Secretary, and five in Member-at-Large positions.

Participant Profiles

Sophie. As the President for GEM (Gender Equity Movement), Sophie was one of the founders of the organization. A majority of her time as a student at the subject university, Sophie served as an active member of the student organization and employed in the Center for Integrated Care. Sophie reported that GEM offered her an outlet to educate her peers while aligning with her passions and undergraduate major. Additionally, she shared that she came
from a small town where she felt very sheltered, and this student organization provided an outlet to explore who she was and what was important to her. GEM served as her gateway to self-exploration, along with her job on campus.

**Helena.** As the President for the Muslim Student Association (BMSA) at the subject institution, Helena felt that this student organization was a good way to connect and educate her peers on the Muslim religion, etc. Furthermore, this student organization provided Helena with a sense of belonging to the campus; making it more like home away from home. Because of her involvement, Helena shared that she has an opportunity to fine tune her skills and grow as a leader. As an example, Helena revealed she had not always found it easy to speak in front of groups, but was growing more comfortable with that skill due to her role with this student organization. Currently as a sophomore at the subject institutions, Helena has been active in this student organization since her first year. In addition to her role in BMSA, Helena is volunteers for other opportunities across campus where she can connect with her peers, staff, and administrators.

**Jasella.** At the time of the focus group, Jasella was serving as secretary of Brockport Muslim Student Association. It is important to recognize that Jasella is one of the original founders of the student organization and has been an active member since its inception. Her involvement with this student organization has afforded Jasella opportunities to increase positive exposure for the Muslim community. Jasella commented that she had also participated in Girl UP, another student organization on the subject university’s campus focusing on gender equality. Nevertheless, Jasella has only remained active in BMSA during her academic career because she found a stronger sense of belonging with BMSA than Girl UP.
**Mackenzie.** For Mackenzie, community service was very important to her, hence resulting in her involvement with Habitat for Humanity. During the study, she served as secretary for this student organization, which has given her a sense of purpose and growth. Additionally, she is actively involved with the Student Leadership Development Program (LDP) at the subject university, and employed by the Community Development department. The LDP helped Mackenzie further develop and grow as a leader, ultimately serving to benefit her effectiveness in her role in Habitat for Humanity.

**Deidre.** At the subject institution, Deidre served as the President for the Women’s Rugby team, part of the Club Sports Council. At the time of the study, Deidre had been a member of women’s rugby since she transferred to the institution a few years earlier. For the last two years, Deidre had been fulfilling leadership roles for the student organization such as president and secretary. Deirdre shared that the women’s rugby team served as her family while at college, creating a true sense of belonging for her. Deidre also remarked that the confidence she developed by participating in women’s rugby gave her the ability to participate in other leadership positions on campus, such as her employment as an event manager for student organizations.

**Karen.** Karen is a freshman serving in a member-at-large role for women’s rugby. In high school, Karen reported she was active in organizations such as student government. Despite her high school experiences, Karen struggled at first when coming to the subject university to figure out where she fit in. Her peers on the women’s rugby team were supportive and helpful, making her feel connected to something while having the benefit of playing a sport. For those reasons, she has continued to participate in women’s rugby during her first year.
**Meredith.** Prior to attending the subject institution, Meredith was actively engaged in gymnastics in high school, and knew she wanted to continue in college. The club gymnastics team provided that opportunity, plus much more. Most recently, Meredith has served as the President of Club Gymnastics; sharing how that experience opened other doors for her on campus in terms of her leadership involvement. Meredith also serves as a member-at-large in role in the Exercise Science Club, providing her direct connections to her career interests.

**Julie.** Due to Julie’s strong interest in broadcast journalism, she joined Talon TV club at the subject university. For the last year, she has served as President. Julie shared that as a freshman she explored different student organizations options through Engage and Club Craze but today remains active in only Talon TV and Club Gymnastics. Julie also reported that she works for Student Union & Activities as a student manager.

**Mary.** Mary is a member of a five different student organizations, each with varying degrees of involvement. She was serving as the President for ECOS, the environmental conscious student organization on campus. The four other student organizations she was involved with ranged from a student acapella group called, Sonore, to Swing Dance Club, Vegan Club, and Campus Ambassadors student organization. Mary’s involvement relates to opportunities for skill development, the things she is passionate about, and with whom she connected. Each of those factors have helped her determine her level of commitment.

**Bridget.** As a member of Swing Dance and History Club, Bridget found herself with an opportunity for a fun social release in Swing Dance and an opportunity to further her career aspirations with the History Club. Bridget feels a strong connection with Swing Dance because it provided her with a sense of belonging and an opportunity to step outside her own comfort.
zone as a student. Bridget also reported that due to her involvement with student organizations she had the confidence to apply for a job with student organizations on campus.

Michelle. Serving as Secretary for Hip Hop Dance Club and President for Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc., Michelle felt that each organization provided an opportunity to interact with students of similar interests and opportunities to grow. Growing up in a metropolitan area, but attending a more rural institution, Michelle was able to make connections with fellow students that help her persist and find success. As an undergraduate student, Michelle was an employee within the campus’s dining services department and worked in one of the dining halls.

Mark. Mark was involved with the Latino student organization called ALAS (Association for Latin American Students). At the time of the focus groups, Mark was serving in the position of the Vice President. Mark shared that he grew up in a traditional Latino family, and this student organization provided an opportunity to connect with fellow students from similar backgrounds, and learn even more about the Latino culture. Additionally, Mark was focused on joining the newly formed Latino Fraternity on campus, LSU (Lambda Sigma Upsilon) during the next new member recruitment period. Lastly, Mark’s on campus employment was with the dining services department working in one of the dining halls.

Nate. As an active member of The Brockport PRIDE Association, Nate shared how this student organization served as an opportunity to make friends and provide support on campus as part of a marginalized group. PRIDE is a student organization providing programs and service for the campus’s LGBTQIA+ community on campus in a safe and inclusive environment. As a student, Nate served in the role of President during his junior year, and has continued his involvement through his initial year of graduate school. Nate identifies as a man, although assigned as a female at birth. For Nate, this student organization provided a needed support
network and safe space to learn while navigating his identity transition. In addition, Nate
worked on campus in one of the university’s academic departments.

**Jacob.** Influenced by a friend already attending the university, Jacob was persuaded to
attend the subject institution. Jacob shared that his decision to stay solidified during his
sophomore year when he became involved with a social fraternity, Pi Kappa Phi. According to
Jacob, the fraternity helped to provide structure, guidance, camaraderie, and leadership growth.
Jacob has served in various leadership roles within the fraternity, helping him to make additional
connections across campus. One such connection was being employed as a student manager for
the college’s student union.

**Fatima.** Growing up in New York City, Fatima shared she was nervous to attend a rural
university, but excited for the change. Following her arrival on campus, Fatima was introduced
to a social sorority, and her involvement with the sorority reinforced her decision to attend the
subject institution. Fatima described her own personal growth from serving as member of the
sorority’s leadership team, and shared that she was determined to help other students get
involved because she understands how much her involvement helped her in transitioning to a
new place. Fatima referenced continually how the sisters in the sorority serve as her family and
provide her regular challenge and support. In addition to the sorority, Fatima was employed as
an assistant to student organizations in the college’s activities department.

**Jackie.** Students often want to explore all of their options for involvement, and Jackie is
one such student. She looked into a number of student organizations before deciding what to
participate in, but in the end, chose Physical Education Club due to career aspirations and Club
Gymnastics because of her love for the sport and the connections with the other students on the
club team. Additionally, her involvement with club gymnastics resulted in an employment
opportunity in the university’s student union. One of Jackie’s teammates from Club Gymnastics who, already employed in the student union, assisted her with getting a job. Jackie has served, and continues to serve, in various leadership roles within both student organizations already mentioned, affording her an opportunity for growth and development.

**Ethan.** As an actively involved student in various student organizations, Ethan is serving as President of the main student government organization at the subject institution. In addition to the time and commitment required by the student government organization, Ethan is active in an acapella group, called Brockapella. Early in his college career, Ethan shared that he began his exploration into student organizations by participating in club sports, specifically ultimate Frisbee, because an upperclassman suggested it. For Ethan, he believes that involvement with student organization provides outlets for students to have fun, learn skills, and make friends in a safe and low risk environment.

**Sara.** Just beginning to explore student organizations, Sara is involved with Veg Club and serving as a member-at-large. Sara shared that Veg Club was of interest to her but that she was still exploring the best student organization option for her that aligned with her passions and on-campus work commitments in the student union.

**Erin.** As a member of GEM, Erin served as secretary. For Erin, GEM serves as an avenue for interacting with students committed to creating equitable opportunities for all. Additionally, as secretary she has been stretched outside of her comfort zone providing opportunities to learn and grow. Additionally, Erin is part of the leadership team for the Honors Club, established to influence the student voice for the Honors Student Program at the subject institution. According to Erin, her student organization involvement has helped her develop skills, make lasting friends, see commitments through, and build community. Additionally, her
involvement with student organizations provided her a gateway to becoming a member of the student union team.

**Antoinette.** Serving as Co-Chair of the Senior Council, Antoinette shared her involvement with various leadership programs on campus, such as serving as a resident assistant, participating in the leadership development program, and peer mentor. Antoinette described her involvement with senior council as a chance to combine her previous leadership experiences as a Resident Assistant and student organization leader into one program, As the co-chair for Senior Council, she continued to develop what she has already learned in previous roles and expand upon her skills.

*Table 1: Summary of Interview Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant (Pseudonym)</th>
<th>Student Organization Council Involvement</th>
<th>Class Year</th>
<th>Student Employment on Campus Y/N</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Religious affiliation (if provided)</th>
<th>Hometown Geographic Location</th>
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<td>Y</td>
<td>White</td>
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<td>Black</td>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>Western NY</td>
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<td>Black</td>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>NYC/Long Island</td>
</tr>
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<td>Christian</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Religious Affiliation</td>
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**Procedures**

This section provides a detailed overview of the specific steps involved in the study, including recruitment plans for participants, data analysis, and the presentation of findings. For this study, the researcher utilized a theoretical framework that would accurately and thoroughly analyze the data collected against relevant literature about student involvement with student organizations. Ultimately, identifying ways that higher education professionals, specifically in student affairs, can enhance a student’s experience by creating a culture of learning through co-curricular activities, like student organizations.

**Recruitment.** After approval from the Northeastern University Institutional Review Board (IRB) (Appendix D), the recruitment process of participants began. Contacting participants for the study was accomplished via email and through the advisors of the specific student organization areas (Appendix A). Another element of the recruiting process included the use of informal conversations with specific advisors and support staff at the subject university who could assist with the coordination of focus groups with students involved with student organizations.
Contact was made with selected students within each student organization area to outline the purpose of the study and to provide an understanding of how the study could impact students following their involvement. The researcher provided participants with background information about the professional interest in the study, as well. Following the selection of participants and as part of the validity of the study, each person was asked to review and sign an informed consent form from Northeastern University (Appendix B). The consent forms explained each of the key components related to a participant’s involvement in my study. The key components included explaining that all information and discussions were completely confidential, participation in the study is voluntary and can stop at any time, and the use of pseudonyms for each participant was integral in protecting their identity and maintaining confidentiality.

Criteria for Quality Qualitative Research

A worthy qualitative research study includes: addressing any ethical issues; identifying credibility; transferability; an internal audit; the role of the researcher and potential biases; and the limitations of the study. As indicated by Lincoln and Guba, qualitative research needs to demonstrate the results of multiple data sources in a truthful and dependable manner, while supporting research findings to broader contexts, and identifying potential bias as part of addressing validity issues (Whittemore, Chase, & Mandle, 2001).

Key qualitative standards. For this study, addressing key qualitative standards as part of the research process was imperative. The following ethical considerations were incorporated into the study’s research procedures: honesty, respect for human subjects, confidentiality, and non-discrimination (Morrow & Smith, 2012). Each of these elements established trust and validated the credibility of the research study. It is critical that the maintenance of confidentiality remain emphasized and employed throughout all aspects of the research. Seeking
IRB approval was an essential aspect of building trust and integrity on the study’s design and focus. This study includes pseudonyms for each focus group and their participation, along with the institution. Furthermore, the plans for sharing specific information from the study, even contrary findings, was provided. Therefore, this case study offers all materials, including transcriptions, tape recordings, relevant documents, plus authentic researcher observations to authenticate the research done. Moreover, all of this descriptive information provides opportunities for other researchers and scholars to emulate the study and use the data collected to influence studies of similar interest.

**Positionality.** Research credibility begins with transparency, and an articulation of the specific case in the study (Creswell, 2013) plus, a full understanding of the researcher’s rationale and approach to conducting the study, along with potential biases. In an effort to minimize biases, the researcher explored their own personal and professional identities to consider how those characteristics could potentially influence the study. As Bourke (2014) stated, personal and professional biases can influence the research process. Therefore researchers must acknowledge the potential implications of one’s study, by assisting with minimizing any distortions or misrepresentation of materials.

For this research, the researcher’s has both personal and professional experiences that potentially influence one or more parts of the study. The researcher has worked in higher education for almost 20 years and has a strong belief in student engagement and involvement with student organizations. As a scholar and practitioner, the researcher must acknowledge that their own experiences, beliefs, and attitudes could actually guide the research. To minimize the influence of the researcher’s perceptions and values, implementing specific protocols to diminish bias is critical. These protocols include: establishing protocols aligning with the research
question, theoretical framework, and a constructivist-interpretivist approach; selection of participants from an identified population sample; transparency with selected participants about the research process; the researcher serving as the only moderator for focus group interviews; and incorporating feedback opportunities from participants on interview transcriptions (Powell & Single, 1996; Morrow, 2005). All of these aspects will assist with minimizing bias in this research study.

**Limitations of the study.** Whereas no study design is perfect, as Marshall and Rossman (2014) outline, every research study has limitations, and it is important researchers acknowledge the limitations. This helps to demonstrate the level of understanding that the researcher has on their research, and, furthermore, adds to a researcher’s credibility (Marshall & Rossman, 2014).

This study serves as a foundation for beginning to understand why students, in their own words and lived experiences, decide to join a student organization. However, the study does have limitations needing consideration. One limitation is whether this study is transferrable to another institution of higher education, particularly private colleges and universities, and still be applicable. Transferability is a potential limitation that is not yet clearly understood in regards to this study, and it will take other similar studies to test if the findings can be applied elsewhere.

In addition to potential limitations on transferability, the sample of participants is a limitation (Yin 2009). The sample size and inclusivity of the student population are all potential limitations. While the researcher selected to perform six focus groups with 6 – 10 participants each, this was not inclusive of all students participating in a student organization, nor was it representative of more than one institution. Again, also, bringing us back to the transferability factor. Research involving a larger pool of participants, plus, the inclusion of other institutions, would help to reinforce and validate the findings of this qualitative case study. That
reinforcement would serve to inform future best practices more broadly because it was germane at more than one institution and included a larger number of research participants.

Overall, this study provides student affairs scholars and practitioners with relevant data, articulating why students decide to join student organizations within a collegiate setting. With the goal of designing a strong comprehensive student organization program, this data enables higher education professionals with a piece of knowledge, directly from students, that had been missing, and will serve to enhance this student involvement opportunity. But, in determining a holistic approach to understanding the cause of involvement with a student organization, future researchers will also need to understand why some students don’t get involved, as well. As higher education continues to evolve and student learning continues to be a primary focus, student organization best practices serve as an opportunity to augment academic systems, procedures, and curriculum, by strengthening the learning environment both in and out of the classroom.

Summary

Congruent with Stake’s (1995) claims of a constructivist-interpretive paradigm, case study methodology emphasizes the importance of analyzing multiple different perspectives through a variety of data sources. As presented in chapter three, a case study approach is a useful tool for developing theory, evaluating programs or services, and for establishing new approaches to best practices (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Furthermore, as indicated by Merriam (1998), case study methodology is useful in examining educational processes and programs to expand one’s understanding, and to assist with making improvements. As previously stated, this definition by Merriam (1998) identifies what this study seeks to analyze, understand, and improve associated with student organization involvement. Additionally, by utilizing Astin’s
Theory of Student Involvement (1984, 1985, and 1999) as the theoretical framework, the data collected from multiple sources equips both scholars and practitioners with developing a deeper understanding of how student involvement supports student learning, growth and development with student organization programs in higher education.

This research study serves as an evaluation of the student organization program at the subject university using multiple sources of data to inform a program evaluation. These data sources included focus groups, program evaluations involving student organization involvement, national survey data, software data from Engage, and interviewer observations.

For this study, all of the data sources, including focus groups, program evaluations, national survey data, software data from Engage, and interviewer observations, investigated how co-curricular activities intersected with student organization involvement. Moreover, each data source provided perspective on how involvement with student organizations created skills and the developmental growth of a student participating in student organizations. The researcher employed the concept of triangulation for gathering information and data from multiple sources (Carter, Bryant-Lukosius, DiCenso, Blythe, and Neville, 2014) to examine the impact student organizational involvement had on participants.

Specifically, the focus group interviews, incorporated a purposeful sampling of students between the ages of 18 – 25, identified through Engage as a member of a registered student organization. Each of the student participants held membership in a minimum of one of these key student organization areas or councils: club sports, fraternities/sororities, academic council, fine arts council, cultural council and service council. Engage, a software platform serving to highlight student engagement opportunities, specifically outlining opportunities to be involved with student organizations (Campus Labs, 2018), provided the formal validation of participation.
in one of these identified student organization areas or councils. Furthermore, student participants were from a variety of different backgrounds, ethnicities, cultures, and interests, see Table 1 below for further details. As a final point, the interview questions for focus groups were based on Astin’s (1984, 1985, 1999) theory of student involvement, as well as, prior research on the role of student engagement.

During analysis, the qualitative research included an organization of the information and materials acquired into common themes and interpretations through a process of coding (Creswell, 2012). With the primary focus of the research on learning about why students decide to participate in student organizations, an inductive approach was utilized. This technique allowed themes to surface naturally. Moreover, by applying inductive analysis and coding procedures a comprehensive set of main concepts with corresponding themes (Creswell, 2012) evolved. As Creswell (2012) articulated, “qualitative research involves abstracting beyond the codes to themes to the larger meaning of the data” (p. 187) to generate an inclusive understanding of the problem or program under examination, thus providing a presentation of scholarly findings to improve practice.
Chapter 4: Findings and Analysis

This chapter provides an account of the significant findings from this research into why students join student organizations. The analysis of the data is described in detail, along with the prominent concepts and themes that evolved after the triangulation of data. The chapter concludes with a summary of the research’s data analysis and its relevance to student development in higher education.

Study Context

The purpose of this study was to understand why students participate in student organizations while attending institutions of higher education. Research on co-curricular involvement has helped student affairs professionals identify the benefits associated with supporting purposeful engagement opportunities, like student organizations. However, there is minimal research about student engagement in clubs and organizations that is explicitly from the student perspective. This necessitates the collection and analysis of qualitative data about student organization involvement from the student viewpoint. Engaging in research focusing on why students decide to get involved with a college’s recognized clubs or organizations helps practitioners provide a holistic learning environment. This research establishes the foundation for student organization program success from both a practitioner and student perspective.

This study took place at a public institution located in a rural area of western New York. The qualitative case study approach enabled the exploration of students’ own perspectives and self-reflection into their involvement with student organizations, along with the ways in which that involvement affected their own collegiate experience and environment. The case study approach allowed the research to use a variety of data sources to generate a thorough
understanding of club and organization programs at the subject university, resulting in a fully informed understanding about student involvement with student organizations.

**Emergent Concepts and Themes**

This section explores those emergent concepts, together with their associated themes, by highlighting relevant information from focus group interviews. The section concludes with reasons participants provided for why students did not participate in, or continue to participate in, a student organization. Altogether, this information reviews in detail the relevant data and materials collected for this case study.

The emergent concepts and themes that evolved through analysis of the data demonstrated the fundamental reasons students joined student organizations. In consideration of the students’ life experiences, the emergent concepts of **Student engagement** and **Skill development** with their associated themes of **Sense of belonging**, **Peer influence**, **Potential for growth**, and **Leadership development** were emphasized, and summarized as follows:

- **Concept 1**: **Student engagement factors**, supported by the themes **Sense of belonging/connection to campus** and **Peer influence**;
- **Concept 2**: **Skill development**, supported by the themes **Potential for growth** and **Leadership development**

This section explores those emergent concepts, together with their associated themes, by highlighting relevant information from focus group interviews. The section concludes with reasons participants provided for why students did not participate in, or continue to participate in, a student organization. Altogether, this information reviews in detail the relevant data and materials collected for this case study.
Student Engagement

Student engagement is a common phrase used in higher education. Historically, student engagement has focused upon increasing achievement and a sense of belonging in students for retention and persistence efforts (Taylor & Parsons, 2011). More recently, student engagement or involvement has included specific strategies for a student’s learning process and institutional accountability for outcomes associated with student learning, growth and development (Astin, 1984; Kuh, 2009; Trowler, 2010; Taylor & Parsons, 2011). The following paragraphs of this section outline the relationship between student engagement and a student’s decision to join a student organization as it relates to sense of belonging and peer influence.

Sense of belonging or connection with campus. Students decided to join student organizations to make friends and to connect with peers with similar interests. A dominant theme that emerged throughout all interviews was that students who were engaged with student organizations felt connected to campus. Involvement with a student organization provided students with both something and someone to relate to, which deepened their sense of community and connection to the college or university. Students remarked that if they had not gotten involved with at least one student organization then they would not have persisted at the university. For example, Jacob said that his fraternity helped him transition to campus and find his sense of belonging. A friend of Jacob’s who attended another local institution did not get involved with a student organization and “hated” his collegiate experience. Furthermore, Mark shared that as a Latinx student coming from a large city to a rural campus, he initially felt isolated, so it was important for him to make friends and feel connected to the institution. He further stated:
It is important to get involved and to feel comfortable on your campus because if you do not feel comfortable on your campus, you are not going to be happy there. You just need to find the student organization that is going to help you make your institution your second home. Because as a Latinx student I wanted to find people, I can relate too.

Beginning with summer orientation and continuing through the first week of classes, when the student organization recruitment event is held and the university’s student organization recruitment event happens, students learn from both practitioners and peers how involvement with student organizations can support their fundamental needs and establish opportunities to grow and learn alongside one’s peers. As Ethan remarked, he saw college as an investment, and participation in a student organization added to his investment while also providing a sense of belonging and connection to the campus. Fatima similarly remarked:

College is where you learn who you are, and who you want to be in the future. So you might, join a club and not like it, and then join another club and it’s fine. It is as if you are discovering who you are, and at the same time, you are making connections and making friends. You are building your future without really knowing who you are at the same time.

Student participants joined student organizations to make friends and to connect with others at the institution. A consistent theme throughout discussions with participants was the importance of connecting to others and finding their home away from home. Each student shared how their student organization provided a safety net for them and contributed to their persistence at the institution. As Michelle noted, “You can be that student where you don’t feel like a university is your home, but the second you join a student organization that aligns with your interests, you’ll stay. You’ll be like ‘This is where I belong.’” Students articulated that it
was important to feel they belonged. The feeling of belonging prepared them to focus on their academic responsibilities and make good decisions for their future. The sentiment of belonging articulated by student participants has direct correlations to student engagement and a student’s investment to their academic success. As Parsons and Taylor (2011) summarized, “student engagement focuses upon increasing achievement, positive behaviors, and a sense of belonging in students so they might remain in school” (p. 3). For this study, this emphasizes how deciding to join student organizations as a means of connecting to others and the institution benefits student engagement outcomes and a student’s overall success.

Students participating in student organizations also shared that deciding to participate in a student organization helped them identify with organizational goals. As previously mentioned, making friends and feeling welcome were important in deciding to engage with a student organization initially, but student engagement was also further determined by sharing common interests with members of the organization that could prove beneficial to one’s development personally and professionally. As Mackenzie shared:

I knew that I wanted to get involved in order to meet new people. I did not come to college with any friends from high school, so I knew that this would be a good way to meet people. And be able to find a way to match my extra-curricular with club interests and goals that associate with what I am studying.

This identification elevated a student’s goal of making friends and reinforced students’ commitment to participating in student organizations and their sense of belonging. As Bridget stated, student organization engagement “gives you a chance to do stuff that actually matters and connect with people who have similar interests.”
Many participants shared that their sense of belonging with student organizations helped determine their level of commitment over time. Students who felt a stronger commitment to an organization could see opportunities to make both organizational and personal improvements, which supported their social and academic growth and development. Improvements included developing a recruitment strategy for members, planning and facilitating meaningful organization meetings, connecting with other constituents on campus to collaborate on a project, fundraising, and initiating programs; they also included managing the fiscal aspects of the student organization. A sense of belonging confirms the importance of involvement with student organizations, which explains the students’ interest in joining.

Peer influence. Peers, both current friends and upperclassmen, influenced student decisions to join a student organization. Many students saw involvement with student organizations as an opportunity to make friends, sharing that their friends in a student organization served as their family while attending college, which also aligned with developing a sense of belonging and engagement. Research emphasizes the role peers have on student decisions, and this study highlights how friends influenced a student’s reason for joining a student organization, thus increasing the likelihood to persist because of that influence (Astin, 1984, 1985, 1999; Berger & Milem, 1999, and Kuh, 1993, 1995, 2009).

Most students who participated in the focus group interviews commented on the importance of making connections with others and making friends, which was a determining factor in their decision to join a student organization. Furthermore, participants shared that those friends were the reason for staying involved. Others remarked that these friends influenced them to explore new ideas, which helped them figure out what their interests were and which student
organizations were best for them. Other participants shared that when this peer influence did not last very long, a lack of involvement with the student organization resulted.

Peers directly influenced other students to join student organizations. It was those peer-to-peer relationships where trust or institutional affiliation was established, which had the greatest influence. Peer influence was not random, but rather, defined by an existing relationship or campus program with peer leaders involved.

Student participants in the focus group interviews -- specifically, Erin, Bridget, Sophie, Mark, and Jacob -- shared that friends, at least initially, influenced them to explore a particular student organization. Each of these students said that friends “dragged” them along to student organization informational meetings, which contributed to their involvement with a student organization. For example, Erin stated:

"Luckily, I had a friend who went to high school with me come here [to the subject university]. She was kind of my security blanket and we explored a bunch of things [student organizations] together. Together, we discovered the club we are still involved with today, at college’s student organization recruitment event."

Mackenzie and Sophie shared that their roommates influenced their choice to attend meetings. Sophie said, “My roommate kind of forced me to go to a meeting. Even though I did not have time to get involved due to work, school, and stuff, I actually enjoyed the club.” The consistency with which peer influence affected decisions to join poses an interesting question for further analysis of patterns of engagement based on peer group, housing arrangements, and other potential institutional patterns.

In addition, more than half of the student focus group participants stated that they were encouraged to explore student organizations by their student orientation leaders when they were
freshmen or by their peer mentor in specific academic programs, such as the Honors Program. Those upperclassmen emphasized the many opportunities for involvement on campus, a prime example of which was student organizations. Seventeen of the 20 participants shared how upperclassmen, during the university’s student organization recruitment event, influenced their decision to explore participation in a student organization. The recruitment event provided an opportunity to explore different student organizations, and oftentimes that specific interaction influenced a student’s decision to participate.

In addition, upperclassmen regularly shared that when they were freshmen at summer orientation, student organizations served as an excellent opportunity for getting involved on campus, making friends, and developing skills. Participants such as Julie, Jackie, Ethan, Mary, Deidre, Michelle, Sara, Mackenzie, Meredith, and Antoinette remarked that a consistent message at summer orientation influenced their involvement with student organizations. That message was reinforced after they attended a student organization recruitment event at the start of a semester. Mackenzie and Bridget shared specific examples of how summer orientation and the student organization recruitment event influenced their decision to join. Mackenzie shared:

Summer orientation was where I learned about a bunch of clubs from members and staff talking about getting involved. There I talked with two different organizations and learned about the leadership development program. Summer orientation is where I first got involved, and I really enjoyed that. Then, I did go to the fall student organization recruitment event and remember signing up for stuff there as well. I think those two events and upperclassmen influenced my involvement, especially orientation.

Students received, from trusted and respected peers, multiple reinforcing messages during campus programs, such as summer orientation and the student organization recruitment event,
which facilitated a student’s decision to explore student organization involvement. Bridget shares a similar experience as Mackenzie. For Bridget both summer orientation and the ability to search all of the student organizations through the subject university’s student organization management software influenced her reasons to join.

Bridget shared:

For me it was definitely freshman orientation. They had this whole session about different organizations on campus trying to convince people to get involved. And I just remember they were like scrolling through student organization software and Swing Dance Society came up on the screen, and I was like, “That sounds interesting.”

Participants in focus groups consistently shared how campus events, peers, and feelings of belonging influenced their decision to join a student organization.

In addition, students saw joining student organizations as a good way to make friends with other students. Bridget shared how she attended the subject university with a close friend at home; each wanted to make new friends together. Both Bridget and her friend thought student organizations were a great way to achieve that goal. Bridget’s experience as a freshman considering joining a student organization was as follows:

When I started at the subject university I was super shy, I happened to come with a friend of mine from high school, and we roomed together so we did not have to talk to anyone else because we knew each other and we were always around each other. We just thought swing dance society would be something new and interesting to try. And we actually ended up liking it a lot and that is really how I made all the friends that I have on campus.

For Mary, joining student organizations helped her develop lasting friendships. Mary stated:
It is just a good way to find friends. I am going to be living with a girl that I met through one of these clubs next year just because we both went to this club and we found each other. Now we are best friends. It is a cool story. Just generally, finding where you fit in college is really important. And the best way I found to do that is to join clubs.

Mackenzie shared:

I knew I wanted to get involved in order to meet new people. I did not come to college with really any friends, so I knew getting involved with clubs and organizations would be a good way to meet people.

Students received multiple reinforcing messages on the importance of student organization involvement during summer orientation, the student organization recruitment event each fall, and the student organization management software. A common practice amongst each campus program and the software was how the message on involvement was delivered. Student leaders and other student peers delivered the message on the importance of involvement with student organizations, thus influencing a student’s engagement with student organizations, according to focus group participants. That influence resulted in an exploration of what was available, then meeting and connecting with other students, and finally generating interest in joining

**Skill Development**

Participation in student organizations provides engagement in campus life, while also developing valuable skills because of involvement. One of the benefits of a student organization is that students learn about themselves and how one works with others. Student organization contributes to future career success by providing an avenue for students to practice and improve skills aiding in their own growth and leadership development. Students in this study identified
student organization involvement as a means for contributing to their future success, and stated they joined student organizations to develop their skills.

**Potential for growth.** Student participants joined student organizations to grow personally and professionally. Additionally, there were significant outcomes achieved which contributed to remaining involved. Involvement with student organizations provided personal growth opportunities for students, such as learning what is needed to be an effective leader, how to manage conflict, how to run a well-structured meeting, how to implement a program or activity, and how to work with others to achieve a goal. Students commented that being involved with student organizations allowed them to apply what they were learning academically to “real-world” settings. Moreover, students shared that being involved with student organizations allowed them to develop skills that would prepare them for future success. Students remarked that involvement with student organizations gave opportunities where they could explore in a safe learning environment, learning from both their mistakes and successes. Erin shared the following reflection she had after being involved with a student organization:

> Learning to be open-minded. I want to think that I always have been, but I used to be very judgmental. But ever since I took on a bunch of roles (in student organizations), I just am learning how different everybody is and if I were to be close-minded, that would just not get me anywhere.

In addition to Erin’s reflection on her skill development, Nate shared how he developed the ability to advocate for what is important. Nate shared that advocacy is an important aspect of his future career goals, and as a member of PRIDE, he was able to grow in his understanding of and ability to advocate more effectively for something. More than half of the student participants provided specific examples of how they had grown, similar to Erin and Nate’s comments
outlined above. Each student emphasized the potential they felt for personal and professional growth because of their involvement with a student organization.

Moreover, each of the student participants articulated the skills they developed because they joined a student organization. Many of the students were able to describe the development of more than one skill. As Meredith articulated:

Patience. I definitely learned patience. And I definitely learned how to stay calm in a stressful situation and provide necessary leadership for my teammates on the gymnastics club team. In addition, I learned about time management and how to balance all responsibilities.

Julie shared:

I would also say time management. Being so involved, you get overwhelmed if you do not plan it all out. Then, I would say working with others, and having to have difficult conversations with others. All skills that have brought me out of my comfort zone.

Table 2 further outlines the skills participants say they developed as a result of participating in a student organization. The table displays the top 10 skills, from highest to lowest, that students articulated learning and developing because of their student organization involvement. For example, Sophie shared that she was far more comfortable being uncomfortable than when she initially joined. She had to develop that skill to maintain her involvement and be prepared professionally. Sophie shared that she realized how much she grew as a person in those uncomfortable moments because she was forced to contemplate what was important, what she needed to learn more about, and how she personally developed. Sophie explained:
That feeling comfortable being uncomfortable was one of the best skills I learned from my student organization involvement. It made her less afraid to try new things, to see the opportunities available, and to focus on improving.

Meredith stated that she learned patience from her student organization involvement: “I definitely learned how to stay calm in a stressful situation.” Karen and Deidre shared that building trust is an important skill. They both needed to trust their club sports team to make the best of each situation, which also helped them to develop better communication skills. As Deidre stated, “Some of the players I don’t get along with off the field but we get along great on the field because we know that is what we need to. So professionalism is there.” Both young women said they have further to grow but they joined student organizations to make friends, have fun, and develop transferable skills.

Table 2.

*Top Ten Skills Developed From Student Organization Involvement*

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<th>Top 10 skills</th>
<th>Additional skills articulated by participants</th>
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<td>Time management</td>
<td>Comfortable being uncomfortable</td>
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<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>Understanding multiple perspectives &amp; being open-minded</td>
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<td>Ability to work with others and build trust</td>
<td>Organization</td>
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<td>Networking</td>
<td>Advocacy</td>
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<td>Professionalism</td>
<td>Conflict management</td>
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<td>Delegation</td>
<td>Patience</td>
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<tr>
<td>Financial</td>
<td>Presentation and public speaking</td>
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<td>Teambuilding</td>
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<td>Self-confidence</td>
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<td>Self-exploration</td>
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Furthermore, students expressed that involvement with student organizations and the development of skills are good resume builders. Student organizations provide a competitive advantage, as students can highlight the development of certain skills and provide direct work
experience supporting their career. The knowledge students learned from being involved with student organizations can be highlighted on their resumes and helps them prepare for future graduate school and employment interviews. As Nate indicated, his student organization involvement helped him show that his commitments are not only to the classroom but also to growing and learning as an individual outside of the classroom:

I feel like the student organization I’m involved with really helps with jobs and potential employment. Overall good resume builder. I want to advocate for my profession as the clients that I will work with as a counselor. So, I think advocacy is needed. I am really happy that I got to advocate while being involved with my student organization.

Meredith shared:

I am going to be a teacher and I need to be able to talk in front of people. With my student organization I have learned to organize my thoughts and get people to do things. Serving as president has been super helpful for practicing that and finding out how to get people to work together.

During the focus group interviews, students reflected on what they had learned and how they had grown as a person due to their involvement with a student organization. Based on conversations and observations, student joined to develop skills but remained involved because of the personal and professional growth achieved. Students stated that a factor in joining a student organization, in addition to making friends and connecting with campus, was to build their resumes and skills for future employment or entrance into graduate schools. Due to their involvement with student organizations, and when considering all of their collegiate experiences in combination, many students indicated they had an increased sense of confidence and preparation for their future.
Leadership development. Students joined student organizations to develop as leaders. For the students involved with this study, student organizations serve as a gateway to developing one’s leadership skills because holding a leadership role within a student organization provided opportunities for acquiring, developing and practicing specific skills. Students felt equipped to successfully manage their professional futures after handling various situations as leaders in a student organization.

For example, Helena discussed how speaking was strongly encouraged during various events as part of her presidential role in BMSA. But she was terrified to speak in front of a group of her peers, staff, faculty, and administrators. Nevertheless, with the encouragement of a staff member and other members of BMSA, she worked to overcome her fear of public speaking and represent her student organization well as president. Helena shared that her presidency of BMSA helped her to face her own fears of public speaking, and to develop confidence in her abilities, needed to an effective public speaker.

In addition, Ethan shared that as a president he learned to create a well-defined vision and goals to help provide a strategic focus for his student organization. Ethan said:

It widened my lens of what I needed to learn to be an effective leader and to dial in on what I want my leadership style to be in order to accomplish the goals mapped out for my organization during my presidency.

Ethan’s leadership position helped him understand the importance of emphasizing organizational goals, while also building buy-in to achieve the objectives he had outlined as the president.

Jacob articulated that his involvement with his fraternity helped him to grow as a leader by: (a) learning to make positive change, (b) learning to work with brothers with different perspectives but the same set of fraternal values, and (c) understanding the importance of open
and honest communication both within and outside the organization. Furthermore, he shared how he learned to think about the “what-ifs” associated with decisions: thinking at least two steps ahead was imperative for making informed decisions. Jacob shared how his involvement with his fraternity provided him with specific leadership opportunities and personal growth. For example:

My involvement with my fraternity provided me opportunities for leadership, developing good communication, and feelings of accomplishment. It helped me more to be a leader, and, you know, trying to think two steps ahead constantly and trying to take care of all the minor, logistical stuff. You learn things from a different perspectives.

Student participants shared that they knew they had grown as leaders after holding a leadership role in a student organization. When asked to articulate how they developed as leaders, students shared many of the skills outlined in Table 2, including: budget management, running meetings, learning to be comfortable with the uncomfortable, finding your voice and the importance of professional articulation, and experience managing different viewpoints and perspectives to create community. Here are a few of examples of what students shared in regards to their leadership development during focus group interviews:

Julie shared:

I feel like I learned time management in order to balance all of my responsibilities.

Being so involved you get overwhelmed if you do not plan it all out. And the other leadership piece I developed was learning to work with others, and having to have difficult conversations with others.

Karen shared:
Trust within each other, and developing that. I think that is a big one. For us [women’s rugby] you have to not only trust on the field but you have to trust them to be there for you. That was growth as a leader for me.

Sophie explained:

As a leader, I got comfortable being uncomfortable. The discomfort is not something I normally experience anymore when engaging and communicating with different people. I have gotten so used to it, I just do it.

Erin described her financial role:

As the treasurer, I have actually learned many important financial things, which I think are important in everyday life. I have learned how to maintain a budget. I sometimes in my role feel like a dream crusher because my other E-board members will be like, “Oh my god, let's get a fog machine.” And I am like; first of all, we cannot have that in the Union. Second, that is really expensive. I know it seems like we have a big budget now, but we do not. Planning, that is another important thing I learned I need to instill as a leader.

As a final example, Ethan shared his perspective:

My organization really cultivated me into understanding leadership in action, and dialing down how I wanted to be a leader. I stress servant leadership a lot. I feel as though that really dialed into what I wanted my leadership style to be. And then, this year as president, it really gave a perspective on how to, not only take responsibility for decisions you make, whether you thought they were good and they went terribly or they went well but other people were still angry. You needed to be able to justify how, why and be able to swallow that people were just going to be mad at you.
Students joined student organization because clubs and organizations provided leadership opportunities. Study participants remained involved once the possibility of leadership development was recognized. Students felt that opportunities to grow, learn, and develop, as a leader were important to their future aspirations. Leadership development is a specific reason for staying involved when the chance to practice skills and prepare for the future was evident.

**Reasons for Not Joining or Continuing to Participate**

As part of the focus group interview process, participants were asked to share why they did not stay involved with a particular student organization or why they may have moved on to a new experience with another student organization. Based on participant feedback, the reasons for not joining or continuing to participate results in threatening one’s sense of belonging, connectedness and identification with organizational focus, thus affecting the desirability for joining. Nate commented, “I did not stay in a club because it was clique-y and because it ended up not doing what it had talked about doing.” Bridget shared:

I had been looking to actually get involved in Harlequins cause I had done a lot of theater in high school, and I went to try to get information from them with no luck and they weren't at the college’s student organization recruitment event during my first semester. I just could not get the information and it just seemed like they were not going to put the effort to put themselves out there and recruit new members.

Reviewing this information, as part of the consideration of the emergent themes is pertinent to fully and holistically understanding why students join student organizations. In addition to the interpretations shared above by Nate and Bridget, Table 3 outlines the five dominant reasons or explanations provided by participants for why they did not get involved with or stay connected to a student organization. The reason most offered by participants is presented first, with less-
frequent reasons following. Many student participants shared more than one reason, but each 
student shared a “primary reason” for not joining or continuing to participate. Each of the 
reasons outlined in Table 3 below correlate with a sense of belonging. As articulated in previous 
sections, a sense of belonging is critically important to study participants when deciding to join a 
student organization.

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students’ Reasons for Not Joining or Continuing to Participate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reason</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People/club cliques were a turn-off</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No sense of purpose to the club</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not serving the needs of the freshmen; more focused on upperclassmen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lacked an effort in recruiting new members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involvement conflicted with other interests</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Triangulation of Data**

The prior section on emergent concepts and themes focused on the details from focus 
group interviews with student members of the subject university’s student organizations. In this 
section, the triangulation of data, each concept and theme is analyzed using feedback from focus 
group participants as well as data materials from other sources, such as NSSE and institutional 
programs and software.

Taking an inductive approach to the full analysis of all the data sources, grounded in a 
constructivist-interpretivist design, the concepts and themes are more dependable and 
trustworthy by using data triangulation. All the data sources, including focus group interviews, 
documents, and Engage software statistics, strengthened the development of the two overarching 
concepts and the four supporting themes. This triangulation of the data was a critical component
for ensuring the validity of the study’s findings. Moreover, triangulation was useful in identifying potential inconsistencies and conflicts related to the data (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014).

To maintain credibility, the researcher analyzed each emergent concept and theme across multiple data sources (interviews, institutional specific data, survey results, and participation statistics). This process utilized an inductive approach, allowing themes to materialize from the data under examination (Creswell, 2012). The confirmation of a finding resulted when at least two data methods established the existence of the theme.

The next few paragraphs outline the confirmation of themes, with tables that highlight how evidence corroborates the emergent concepts and subsequent themes. This offers answers to the primary research question of the study as well as the rationale for how specific concepts and their associated themes emerged in response to the study’s primary research question.

**Student Engagement**

Today, higher education institutions face increased challenges in attracting and retaining students, satisfying and developing them to ensure they are successful, and becoming productive citizens (Trowler, 2010). Student engagement serves to address these challenges and fulfill its role in developing students. Furthermore, student organizations serve as a student engagement opportunity pivotal in determining a student’s investment to an institution and for enhancing learning. This study highlighted how a student’s peers influence student engagement, and how student organization involvement connects students to campus. The remainder of this section outlines the role of sense of belonging and peer influence have in answering why students decide to participate in student organizations at the collegiate level.
**Sense of belonging and peer influence.** Student participants consistently articulated that student organizations connected them to campus and gave them a sense of purpose while attending college. Moreover, peers also influenced their decision to join. Other data sources, such as NSSE, program survey results, and Engage software statistics, strengthened the themes of *Sense of belonging* and *Peer influence* in relation to student involvement with a student organization.

Sufficient evidence was provided throughout this study to support both of these themes and the overarching concept of *Student engagement*. The evidence emphasizes how student organizations created a space where students could feel they belonged, identify with its purpose, and find connections with peers. Specifically, supporting evidence from focus group interviews substantiate these themes, including the following bulleted examples from student participants:

- Deirdre stated, “Once you feel like you belong into something, some little niche like a club, you’re more guaranteed to stay.”
- Jackie shared, “The people make this place, but I wouldn’t have met those people if I didn’t get involved with a student organization”
- Mark commented, “Initially it was about finding people that I could relate to, and I could do that with my student organization focusing on LatinX students.”
- Helena shared, “I have to go and join this club, because I identify with the club and it provided a place to belong.”
- Meredith stated, “I did not want to stop doing gymnastics so club gymnastics became my option, and also resulted in being my safe space.”
• As stated by Sophie, “My roommate forced me to go to a meeting and I made all my friends I would ever need.” “I joined because my friend wanted to join,” stated Karen regarding her reason for joining women’s club rugby.

• Erin shared that, “My friend and I discovered GEM together” and that is how we became involved with the student organization.

• Nate stated that, “I meet my best friend the first week of my freshmen year by being involved with the same club as him,” and that was one of the main reasons for his involvement.

• Both Jackie and Ethan felt influenced to join by upperclassmen, sharing that “hearing from orientation leaders about what to get involved with” was a direct influence on my decision to join something, “as well as other student leaders.”

• Erin shared, “It was my honors peer mentors who impacted my decision to join because they were the first people I connected with on campus.”

• Finally, Jacob commented, “The fraternity brothers helped me feel connected and influenced me to join.”

In addition to the feedback received from student participants, data sources such as NSSE, National Survey of Student Engagement, and institutional programs provided supporting evidence that also aligned with the sense of belonging and peer influence themes. A chi-square conducted using institutional NSSE data for the university concluded that there was a significant relationship for both freshmen and senior respondents between time spent on co-curricular activities with leadership in student organizations and choosing to attend the same institution again if given the option. The relationship between those components (co-curricular involvement and leadership and retention rates) are meaningful data points for this study. Tables
4-7 provide specific percentages from the NSSE results for both freshmen and senior student populations relating to formal leadership roles in student organizations, choosing the same institution, and the amount of time spent. Analysis of the data in each table shows increasing numbers of students involved with student organizations from freshmen to senior year. This data emphasizes the correlation between student organization involvement and leadership development over time, plus the connection to the institution due to co-curricular involvement. Students appear to begin connecting with student organizations as early as their freshmen year, and as seniors many students have completed a leadership role or are currently in one, based on the NSSE data; 41.5% of seniors at the subject university have completed or are in the process of completing a leadership role in student organization. This data helps accentuate the connection to student organizations from freshmen to senior year and highlights the importance of leadership development, another theme that evolved from this study.

Similarly, the chi-square between student organizations and retention to an institution was significant, which is substantial evidence supporting the influence that involvement has on student retention and persistence rates, particularly over one’s collegiate journey from freshmen to senior year. Among those seniors involved with co-curricular activities, 83.2% would likely choose to attend the same institution. It appears that a student’s decision to join a student organization results in developing a sense of belonging to the institution and influences student engagement.

However, following analysis of the data, it is critical to examine, in more depth, the differences between freshmen and senior years, as seen in Tables 7 and 8, to investigate how that affects student organization involvement levels. For example, it appears that freshmen have a lower involvement rate than seniors when it comes to choosing to attend the same institution.
For student affairs practitioners, it is important to examine the reasons why there are differences over time and how involvement with student organizations appears to reinforce the choice of one’s institution in senior year at a higher percentage than as a freshman.

Table 4

*Leadership in a Student Organization x Involvement in Co-Curricular Activities, Freshmen*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Leadership level</th>
<th>No involvement</th>
<th>Involvement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Have not decided/Do not plan to</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plan to do/Done or in progress</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>24.3%</td>
<td>75.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5

*Leadership in a Student Organization x Involvement in Co-Curricular Activities, Seniors*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Leadership level</th>
<th>No involvement</th>
<th>Involvement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Have not decided/Do not plan to</td>
<td>177</td>
<td>114</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plan to do/Done or in progress</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>198</td>
<td>290</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>39.8%</td>
<td>58.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6

*Choosing the same institution x Involvement in Co-Curricular Activities, Freshmen*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Choosing same institution</th>
<th>No involvement</th>
<th>Involvement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Definitely no/Probably no</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definitely yes/Probably yes</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>75.5%</td>
<td>79.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7

*Choosing the same institution x Involvement in Co-Curricular Activities, Seniors*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Choosing same institution</th>
<th>No involvement</th>
<th>Involvement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Definitely no/Probably no</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definitely yes/Probably yes</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>243</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>199</td>
<td>292</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>73.9%</td>
<td>83.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Institutional programs at the subject university also provided evidence that supported the connection to campus for students and reasons for joining. According to the 2017 Summer Orientation Survey, 75% of new students attending summer orientation were aware of opportunities to get involved on campus and knew how to log onto campus systems such as Engage, the university’s student organization software system. As stated by focus group participants, summer orientation leaders provided context for involvement and suggested student organizations would be a way to connect to campus and make friends. Furthermore, participants consistently remarked how the student organization recruitment event and the student organization recruitment event provided them with connections to peers and student organizations. In fall 2017, over 2,000 students participated in the student organization recruitment event and learned about student organization opportunities. In fall 2018, student organization recruitment event participation was over 1,800. Based on campus information for events, each fall this is one of most highly attended events of the year, which correlates to students using student organizations as a way to belong on campus.

Finally, upon examination of data from the subject university’s student organization software platform, Engage, in 2017-2018 there were over 4,000 student members in 135 student organizations: over 50% of the student population was involved in a student organization. Seven of the 135 organizations were new to the university. In addition, data from institutional programs highlighted an increase in programmatic efforts by student organizations in the last two years, with an increase of 525 program requests in 2017-2018 from 2016-2017. This data highlights the importance of outreach, awareness, belonging, and education that is shared by student organizations. This is congruent with a point emphasized by a number of focus group
participants, so this increase corroborates the importance of finding a club to identify with in relation to developing a sense of belonging.

Concerning *Sense of belonging* and *Peer influence*, data triangulation provided a more comprehensive understanding of why students join student organizations. In addition, triangulation provided a foundation for testing the validity of information shared in focus groups and other data sources, emphasizing the influence that sense of belonging and connectedness had for students in relation to joining a student organization.

**Skill Development**

As Smith & Chenworth (2015) shared, students acquire skills by practicing them, and student organizations provide an avenue to foster the development of a variety of skills and leadership qualities. By offering opportunities to practice, develop, and utilize skills, participants in this study believed involvement with student organizations enhanced their personal growth, development, and success. The next part of this section outlines how the concept of skill development answers the research question of why students decide to participate in student organizations.

**Potential for growth and leadership development.** In the focus group interviews, participants expressed that their involvement with student organizations provided them with opportunities to grow, learn, and develop their leadership skills. Other data sources, such as NSSE, program survey results, and Engage software statistics, provided supporting documentation for how student organization involvement reinforced skill development.

Ample evidence from this study supports both of these themes as well as the overarching concept of *Skill development*. The evidence supports the influence of skill development as a reason why students join organizations. To begin, below are examples from student focus
groups members that substantiate skill development and its associated themes of Potential for growth and Leadership development.

Mackenzie stated, “I learned for myself how to work with a diverse group of people.” When asked what skill she developed, Sophie remarked, “I learned about myself and what was important.” Julie shared that she chose her student organization “because of the potential for growth and the leadership that was needed in the student organization, and the opportunity to learn and practice skills.” Nate commented that he came from a small town, and “wanted to expand my perspectives and joining student organizations was a way to do that.” He went on to explain that “professionally, advocacy is important and being involved with my club helped me to develop advocacy skills” that he could use in his future profession in social work. Jasella stated how her involvement with a student organization provided an environment for “learning to be a leader and a better leader.” As treasurer of her student organization, Erin “learned a lot of important financial things” that she could use in the club and in life. As president of his organization, Ethan shared that being in a student organization leadership role “widened my lens of what I needed to learn to be an effective leader and effective human.” Michelle shared that being in an organization helped her with “taking the skills you learn about in the classroom and applying them to real life.”

The feedback received from focus group participants served as one source of data, but NSSE and institutional programs provided additional information related to understanding the influence of skill development on reasons for joining a student organization. Similar to student engagement, chi-square tests of institutional NSSE data for the subject university had significant results for both freshmen and senior respondents with respect to the involvement in co-curricular activities and leadership opportunities in student organizations, as previously mentioned. This
supporting data, particularly when combined with other sources of information, shows that student organization involvement affects student growth, learning, and development. Tables 4-7 provide data from the subject university’s NSSE results. It is important to note the growth in numbers from plan to done or in progress from freshmen to senior years. This data helps emphasize the connection to student organizations from freshmen to senior year, with percentage rates for planning to or in leadership roles at 75.7% for freshmen and 58.2% for seniors. These numbers highlight the importance of leadership development to those students involved with student organizations, but the data also shows there is room for growth among students who are not involved.

Analysis of the data related to joining student organizations would not be complete without an examination of data points from the student organization software platform, Engage. In both August 2017 and 2018, over 200 students participated in student organization mandatory training coordinated by the three departments that were responsible for club and organization management and development. Results from training surveys highlighted that students was a welcomed the introduction of training in 2017 because it provided information they needed for success. Furthermore, based upon practitioner experience and student organization feedback, the university began an organization leadership certificate in 2017, in which over 60 students participated. Student participants in the certificate program said they were looking for opportunities to improve skills and that student organizations and the certificate program supported that intent. Based on the collection and analysis of data regarding why students join student organizations, the Potential for growth and Leadership development are meaningfully aligned with Skill development and are relational to student organization involvement.
Conclusion

Chapter 4 has presented the findings of a case study focused on why students engage with student organizations as part of their collegiate experiences. As higher education examines the role of co-curricular activities as a learning tool, the findings of this case study are vitally important in highlighting how students augment their in-class instruction, connect with an institution (which aids student retention and student success), and develop transferable skills that support each student’s future goals.

The primary research question guiding this study was as follows: *Why do students join student organizations?* Twenty students from one of the six student organization councils (club sports, fraternities/sororities, academic council, fine arts council, cultural council and service council) participated in the focus groups. These interviews provided information directly from the students related to why each joined a student organization, how each learned about the opportunities to participate, and, in some instances, why they were no longer a member of a certain student organization. To enhance the data obtained from the focus group interviews, a triangulation of all of the data sources (focus group interviews, institutional NSSE data, programmatic data for summer orientation and student organization recruitment event, and data retrieved from the student organization software system Engage) was performed.

The triangulation of data resulted in the development of the following concepts and themes on why student join student organizations: *Student engagement factors*, influenced by *Sense of belonging/connection to campus* and *Peer influence*, and *Skill development*, shaped by *Potential for growth* and *Leadership development*. These concepts and themes evolved into three key findings: belongingness, transferable skill development, and leadership enhancement. There is a correlation between students being directly influenced by peers and their desire to join
student organizations. This encouragement comes from two perspectives, peers urging students to join as well as an opportunity to make friends. All of this leads to a sense of belonging, which fosters a connection to the institution and the student’s own identity, and then acceptance, which supports a student’s skill development and growth as a leader. Validation of the core concepts and themes of this study was accomplished through a review of both the qualitative and quantitative data sources, which supported the key findings.

Chapter 5 examines how these findings align with the theoretical framework, Astin’s theory of student involvement, and relates them to relevant bodies of literature. The chapter will also discuss the implications of the findings and suggestions for future practice and research.
Chapter 5: Discussion and Implications for Practice and Research

Following a brief overview of the study, the subsequent sections of this chapter describes the key findings related to the study’s research question, discusses their significance to the larger body of literature, and examines the importance of higher education professionals’ co-curricular work with student organizations. The analysis of the findings provides a platform for informing the role of the practitioner by proposing specific recommendations for future practice and research. The chapter concludes with an overall summary of and reflection upon this research study into why students join student organizations.

**Study Overview**

This study sought to learn more about what attracts students to join student organizations during their undergraduate academic careers. Significant research exists about the benefits of participation in student organizations (Dugan, 2013; Friedlander & MacDougall, 1992; Gellin, 2003; Kuh, 1993, 1995, 2009; Kuk, Thomas & Banning, 2008; Richmond, 1986; Smith & Chenoweth, 2015). However, few studies describing why students choose to participate in a club or organization (Trowler, 2010). This study analyzed how involvement influences overall student success by blending the benefits of participation in student organizations with the lived experiences of students who have been engaged in a student organization. Furthermore, this study provides evidence supporting the value of student organization involvement in developing skills, creating connections to an institution, and fostering opportunities to grow as leaders (Lauckner, Paterson, & Krupa, 2012).

This study specifically sought to identify the characteristics and motivations for college student involvement with student organizations in order to understand the mechanisms needed to design and implement intentional engagement activities. This qualitative inquiry is critically
important for student affairs practitioners. This study will assist in the development and management of purposeful engagement opportunities for students. Therefore, its primary research question was: “Why do students join student organizations?”

The study used an instrumental case study approach to develop a holistic understanding of student engagement with clubs and organizations. Participants were purposefully selected; they had to have been involved with a student organization as an undergraduate student, be between the ages of 18 and 25, and be identified as an active member of one of the student organization councils at the subject institution. The subject university’s student engagement software, Engage, was used to verify that each participant was a member of one of the six student organization councils (Club Sports, Inter-Greek Council, Cultural Council, Fine Arts Council, Service Council, and Academic Council) at the subject university.

Inductive analysis of interview data, institutional programs, and documentary evidence was employed, as recommended by Miles and Huberman (1994), Creswell (2012), and Stake (1995, 2013). After data triangulation, as outlined in chapter 4, answers to this study’s research question emerged, producing two key concepts, each with two associated themes. The two overarching concepts were Student engagement factors and Skill development. The two accompanying themes for Student engagement factors were Sense of belonging/connection to campus and Peer influence. The two accompanying themes for Skill development were Potential for growth and Leadership development. The key findings were validated through data triangulation when at least two separate sources of evidence substantiated (Creswell, 2012; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Miles et al., 2014) the development of these concepts and themes.
Research Question Analysis

The primary research question, “Why do students join student organizations,” was intentionally wide-ranging so the research could discover what motivated undergraduate students to join student organizations. Two main concepts emerged in answer to this question, *Student engagement factors* and *Skill development*. The themes associated with each concept are *Sense of belonging/connection to campus* and *Peer influence*, and *Potential for growth* and *Leadership development*.

The first concept that emerged relating to this question was *Student engagement factors*, which was associated with the themes *Sense of belonging/connection to campus* and *Peer influence*. Students shared that they joined after the initial meeting with the student organization because they felt a sense of belonging and because friends influenced them to join. Both a sense of belonging and the influence of peers were strong indicators of participation. Oftentimes, the two themes intersected, which further helped students decide to participate.

Each student shared stories of how friends (both those in the current class year and upperclassmen) encouraged them to participate in a specific organization, and their perceived connection with the club or organization determined whether they would become a member. For example, Ethan shared how an upperclassman encouraged him to explore engagement options in student government. The student shared with Ethan that a role in student government would put his skills to good use. That encouragement boosted his sense of belonging, which helped him decide that joining student government was right for him. If not for the input from his peers or the potential connection to campus, Ethan stated that he would not have participated. Ethan provided a specific example of how his decision to join and participate in a student organization was influenced by feeling valued by his older friend. Students consistently commented on how...
peers influenced their engagement decisions, along with how connected they felt to an organization and the people involved with it. This ultimately linked them to the subject university.

The second concept that emerged relating to this question was *Skill development*, which was associated with the themes *Potential for growth* and *Leadership development*. Students joined to build their resumes in order to garner a future job or entrance into graduate school. They saw involvement with student organizations as a good way to develop their skills and provide opportunities to learn and grow which directly supported their future goals.

Students joined because they believed that participation in student organizations helped them grow, learn, and develop. This is evident from all students being able to name one or more skills they developed as a result of their involvement with a student organization. Furthermore, students shared that student organization involvement prepared them for their future by providing opportunities to develop and apply skills. Nate revealed that he had a strong interest in advocacy work, and as president of his student organization, its appeal for him was confirmed. Through that experience, he understood his desire to advocate for the LGBTQA community. Originally, he was attracted to the student organization because he found a place to belong and felt safe and valued, but he stayed involved because he saw the potential to fine-tune his skills and prepare for his future career. Nate also said that through his organizational involvement he experienced a combination of classroom learning and practice, which emphasized the scholar-practitioner ideals.

To summarize, students joined student organizations to make friends, secure their identity, develop skills, and experience their leadership potential. Each reason attracted students to participate, and more than one reason often influenced the decision to join and stay involved.
Key Findings

Student participants provided astute and well-articulated perspectives on why they chose to participate in at least one student organization during their collegiate years. Following review and analysis, and reflection upon the study’s research question, three key findings materialized, which are as follows:

- **Belongingness is a key factor to engagement.** Students consistently shared the importance of feeling connected to a group of individuals or to a student organization as the basis for joining. As research has stated, a sense of identity and belonging are directly influenced by experiences, relationships, and environment (Stokes, 2017). Strayhorn (2012) defined sense of belonging as “the students’ perceived social support on campus, a feeling of connectedness, or that one is important to others” (p.16). Many of the students articulated the importance of perceived social support, of finding a place to “feel at home,” while at the same time having the opportunity to grow and learn in a safe, inclusive, nonjudgmental environment through their involvement with a student organization.

- **Development of transferable skills was a benefit.** Students join student organizations to develop their skills. Each of the students shared at least one skill they had further developed through being involved with one or more student organizations. Many of them articulated how the skills they developed would serve them in the future, in either graduate school or employment. This finding aligns with prior research on the benefits of participating in student organizations (Dugan, 2013; Foreman & Retallick, 2012; Gellin, 2003; Kinzie & Gonyea, 2013; Kuh, 1993,1995, 2009; Kuk et al., 2008; Richmond, 1986; Smith & Chenoweth, 2015). It adds the perspective of the students’ lived experiences.
and understanding of what they will gain from involvement with a student organization and one of the reasons a student joins.

- **Participating in a student organization develops leadership potential.** Leadership development is recognized as a reason for joining by students. Students shared that they felt better prepared for the future after experiencing different leadership roles in their student organizations. Their leadership roles helped them grow more confident in their abilities and expand outside of their comfort zone. Moreover, experience as a leader in a student organization emphasized the importance of learning specific skills, such as listening, to enhance productivity. For many of the student leaders, organizational challenges presented them with opportunities to develop personally and professionally. The potential to develop as a leader through involvement with student organizations attracted them to participate and was seen as of value to their future success.

**Discussion of Research Study Findings**

This section examines how each of the key findings intersects with engagement, skills development, and leadership potential through student organization involvement. Support for the key findings is substantiated by the relevant literature and theoretical framework. This discussion of the key findings is critical to understanding the intersection of both the scholar and the practitioner roles with co-curricular involvement.

**Belongingness is Key to Engagement**

As both scholars and practitioners, it is important to understand the importance of developing a sense of belonging for college students. Belongingness is an inherent human need. This need often lends value to what we do as humans because of the desire to be part of something bigger rather than doing it alone (Stayhorn, 2012). A sense of belonging is a basic
need for college-aged students, often influencing the role of engagement on a college campus. For this study, belongingness is central to a student’s connection with a student organization. As articulated by Thomas (2012), “engagement develops relationships with others and promotes connectedness” (p. 12), nurturing the feeling of belonging to a college or university. Upon further examination, this sense of belonging validates this study’s use of Astin (1984, 1999) as its theoretical framework. As heard from student participants, the importance of belonging is key to making friends and finding a place to belong. These factors are components of Astin’s (1984, 1999) work, particularly the influence of peers and a student’s investment in the collegiate experience. Essentially, Astin’s theory emphasized the significance of finding ways for students to connect through involvement (Richmond, 1986), thus deepening their association to the university and contributing to their own collegiate success.

Student engagement, influenced by belongingness, cultivates a student’s level of participation in activities and events, both in and out of the classroom, throughout a student’s life cycle (Astin, 1995; Thomas, 2012). Astin’s theory of student involvement “found that student persistence was related to levels of student activity (like student organizations) and contact with the institution and peers” (Thomas, 2012, p. 15), which reduced attrition. Thus, the outcomes of this study support the relevant literature’s view that student organizations provide a substantial opportunity for involvement, which, along with supporting students’ skill development and sense of belonging, promote the retention and persistence factors that are important to an institution.

This study provided a meaningful conclusion regarding belongingness, which is that students decide to participate in student organizations in order to establish solid connections with peers. Focus group participants consistently articulated how peer groups influenced their decisions to join student organizations. This sense of connectedness framed student decisions to
join a student organization and remain involved. As a common theme that resonated throughout focus group interviews was the concept of belongingness, which was validated by peer influence and proved an integral part of a student’s decision to join a student organization. Focus group participants shared examples, including but not limited to how friends influenced their decisions to join a specific organization. For example, Bridget shared how she and her high school friend explored student organizations together. They each knew they wanted to connect with their peers and find a place they were comfortable and could belong. Examples such as Bridget’s were the norm among student participants. Student affairs practitioners should not underestimate this concept in regards to affinity with an institution and student success.

Moreover, many participants articulated that they remained actively involved in student organizations because of the opportunities available to them as a member, such as skill development, leadership roles, and interaction with peers. This study found that student organizations serve as a tool for developing a sense of belonging among college-aged students and as a gateway for student engagement. In addition, peer influence directly affects the levels of involvement among students, reinforcing the findings of other research and literature (Dugan, 2013; Foreman & Retallick, 2012; Friedlander & MacDougall, 1992; Gellin, 2003; Kinzie & Gonyea, 2013; Kuh, 1993,1995, 2009; Kuk et al., 2007-2008; Richmond, 1986; Smith & Chenoweth, 2015; Webber et al., 2013). The importance of belongingness is reinforced as being a substantial component of student engagement, which is often affected by a student’s peers. Belongingness contributes to other factors that are important in higher education today. For example, student organizations help students feel connected and part of the campus community. Strayhorn (2012) found that peer engagement was a key component of belongingness, which highlighted the importance of being your authentic self and acceptance of who you are. The
development of support networks, such as friends, and feelings of acceptance helps students develop a sense of identity in their collegiate environment (Panori, Wong, Kennedy, & King 1995). Peer engagement in student organizations emphasizes the significance of belongingness for developing feelings of connectedness with one’s peers. This requires the development of a social network, which can be provided by involvement with co-curricular student organizations. Astin (1996) found “that involvement characterized by the peer interactions often found in student clubs and organizations can play on development” (Dugan, 2013, p. 230). In addition, Thomas (2012) identified how student engagement in collegiate programs, in and out of the classroom (such as student organizations), has a profound effect on student retention and persistence. This study emphasized the capacity students had to articulate their sense of belonging, along with how peers influenced their engagement. Study participants within the collegiate environment identified opportunities to develop support networks through involvement with student organizations. They lead to potential increases in retention and persistence because of the belongingness created through engagement with student organizations. As a result, belongingness directly correlates with influencing student retention and persistence, particularly for students who are involved with clubs and organizations.

There is undeniably a correlation between sense of belonging, peer influence, and levels of engagement; this relates to this study’s research question about why students join student organizations. This finding aligns with Astin’s theory of student involvement. Astin (1984) specifically stated that any type of co-curricular activity, such as involvement with student organizations, increases the likelihood that a student remains in college and persists to graduation. Consequently, student organizations are a valuable asset: they contribute to the
development of a sense of belonging, thus increasing retention and reinforcing the importance of student engagement.

Astin (1984) found that student persistence relates to various levels of student involvement with activities in and out of the classroom, as well as with engagement with the institution and their peers (Thomas, 2012). Therefore, as students are looking for ways to make friends, to connect, and to succeed while attending an institution of higher education, student organization involvement is a key way to engage students in their academic journeys and create the sense of belonging they need to both retain and persist to graduation.

The increase in retention rates and the importance of student engagement emphasizes the importance of certain variables that influence involvement, sense of belonging, and peer engagement. These variables are affected by a student’s investment of time, energy, and motivation by joining a student organization. As Kuh (2009) shared, student engagement includes both the time and effort that students dedicate to activities; this is similar to Astin’s theory of student involvement (1984, 1985, 1999). In addition, a supportive peer environment influences investment in the time and effort needed to establish a sense of belonging. Therefore, it essential for institutions to examine effective strategies for promoting opportunities to get students involved in meaningful activities, such as student organizations, that enhance the overall student experience.

**Transferable Skill Development**

This study and its results validated the development of transferable skills through a student’s involvement with student organizations. Furthermore, this study emphasized that having an opportunity to develop skills was a reason students gave for joining. As stated by Kuk, Thomas, and Banning (2008), “student co-curricular involvement, including clubs and
organizations, may have positive implications for cognitive development and foster critical thinking” (p. 12), which was validated in this study.

Huang and Chang (2004) showed how both academic and co-curricular involvement bolster intellectual and cognitive growth among students. Moreover, co-curricular activities emphasize opportunities that explore a variety of different perspectives, develop support groups, and reinforce the development of transferable skills.

In addition, Webber, Bauer Krylow, and Zhang (2013) found that student involvement helps students develop time management skills, create ideas, strengthen their academic training, and perfect professional skills. Student participants continually provided examples that supported current and previous literature, such as Webber, Bauer Krylow, and Zhang (2013), which found that co-curricular involvement and participation in student organizations assisted with developing specific employable skills. This study provided evidence directly from the student participants, who consistently articulated how their involvement with one or more student organizations helped them to grow, learn, and develop their cognitive skills.

All of the participants identified at least one skill they developed through their involvement with a student organization, as was shown in in Chapter 4. The top 10 skills discussed were time management, communication, ability to work with others, networking, professionalism, delegation, financial, teambuilding, and self-confidence. Many participants shared that they were able to apply the skills developed through their involvement with student organization to other situations. This sentiment further emphasizes the transferability of skills between different circumstances and the importance of student organizations as a venue for developing and practicing one’s skills. This is important for a student’s future because many
employers are looking for the development of soft skills, similar to the ones participants shared in table 2 of Chapter 4, which is a learning outcome desired by student affairs professionals.

According to Patterson (2012), employers primarily value competence in communication, adaptability, problem-solving, and teamwork. Several studies emphasize the empirical link between participating in student organizations and students’ development of leadership skills (Dugan, 2011; Renn & Bilodeau, 2005; Thompson, 2006). These desired skills, while often introduced in an academic setting, are reinforced in co-curricular activities such as student organizations (Patterson, 2012). Peers have been found to play a substantial role in cognitive growth and intellectual development and, in some cases, are actually a stronger influence than some of the students’ in-class experiences (Kuk et al., 2008). To reiterate previous research and studies, student involvement in campus organizations is positively correlated with skill development and personal growth (Dugan, 2013; Foreman & Retallick, 2012; Foubert & Grainger, 2006; Gellin, 2003; Huang & Chang, 2004; Kinzie & Gonyea, 2013; Kuh, 1993, 1995, 2009; Kuk et al., 2007-2008; Lundberg, 2003; Patrick, Niles, Maegetiak, & Cunning, 1993; Rainey, 1995; Richmond, 1986; Rubin, 2000; Smith & Chenoweth, 2015). Study participants shared that it was through their involvement with student organizations that they realized the vast number of opportunities available to them for practicing skills in a relatively safe environment, allowing them to foster skill growth and development. This study highlighted the importance of peers in creating a sense of belonging; it is equally important to note that peers also influenced the development of skills.

**Participation in Student Organizations Develops Leadership Potential**

Students join student organizations because clubs and organizations are a platform for developing leaders. Study participants recognized how their involvement in student
organizations supported their development as leaders. For example, Ethan shared how his leadership position helped him understand the importance of organizational goals, and that building buy-in to achieve objectives was necessary. Similar to this study, Kuh (1995) showcased how students “credited the tasks of leadership—planning, organizing, managing, and decision-making—with promoting growth among student leaders” (Foubert & Grainger, 2006, p. 170) through co-curricular involvement. Foubert and Grainger (2006) also contended that involvement with student organizations leads to higher levels of development for students and supports their growth in leadership.

Student organizations are co-curricular activities that influence leadership development in students. Research supports that the experiences students have in college are strong predictors of leadership development (Astin, 1993; Sax & Astin, 1998; Smart, 1997; Smart, Ethington, Riggs, & Thompson, 2002), and gains in students’ positive academic and social self-concepts have been connected to their involvement in co-curricular activities (Berger, 2002; Kezar & Moriarity, 2000, Whitt, 1994). Student participants stated that they felt more prepared to take on various leadership roles following their experiences with one or more student organizations because they had offered a safe environment in which they could develop their leadership potential without any real negative consequences. This allowed students an opportunity to develop confidence in exploring themselves as leaders.

Moreover, both the experiences of students who were active in student organization and data from institutional documents validated prior research on the potential for leadership development. The institutional National Survey for Student Engagement (NSSE) data showed that there was a significant relationship between involvement in co-curricular activities and leadership in student organizations. This was noteworthy for both freshmen
and seniors, with a larger effect on the student experience by the senior year. This information supports the findings of this study by showing the association between involvement with co-curricular activities and the potential to develop leadership skills. For the subject university, this validates the existence of a correlation between the potential for leadership development and a student’s co-curricular involvement with student organizations.

Summary of Findings

This study sought to understand why students join student organizations. Based on the study’s findings and existing literature, concrete evidence has been provided for why students participate in student organizations. Students communicated, and literature supports, that feeling connected to one’s academic institution is important because it provides learning environments where students feel supported in cultivating an understanding of self and nurturing their personal and professional growth. A sense of belonging developed through engagement with student organizations helps students feel connected with their academic experiences. Due to the desire to develop skills and enhance one’s leadership abilities as a reason for joining a student organization, connectedness also provides students with opportunities to develop skills and leadership potential, as well as relationships with their peers. Involvement in student organizations, as corroborated by this study, enhances a student’s personal growth and development.

Astin’s theory of student involvement (1984, 1985, 1999) provided the framework for understanding this research and its importance. According to Astin’s (1984, 1985, 1999) theoretical perspective, increased student engagement in an activity would increase the probability of a student’s retention and persistence rates being strengthened; this emphasizes the
importance of student engagement. Astin’s theory of student involvement also provided the
guidance needed to analyze, manage, and assess the various stages of the research process.
It is important to reflect upon how this theoretical framework influenced this study and its
conclusions by examining the five basic tenets of Astin’s theory of student involvement (1984,
1985, 1999). The first tenet attests to levels of involvement based upon the amount of physical
and psychological energy being devoted to an academic experience. With respect to
involvement with student organizations, students consistently commented on how their regular
involvement with a club or organization determined their level of involvement, particularly when
they felt as if they belonged through peer connections and could identify opportunities for
growth. The second tenet defines how involvement is determined along a continuum of time.
For example, the more time that students spent on an engagement opportunity, such as a student
organization, the more likely they were to remain involved. Based on data collected from this
study’s focus groups, the more involved students became over time with the organization, the
more invested they became in that club or organization. The third tenet explains that research
associated with the theory can be either quantitative or qualitative. This case study was
qualitative, with quantitative supporting documentation. Astin’s fourth tenet focuses on the role
of student learning and development when combined with engagement. For example, the more
that students engage in a co-curricular activity, the greater their opportunity to learn and grow
from those experiences. Each of the student participants could specifically articulate what skills
had been developed because of their involvement and could describe how their involvement with
a student organization provided them with opportunities to both learn and practice skills.

Finally, the fifth tenet encompasses the role of institutional policy and practices related to
an involvement activity. As an example, the student organization recruitment event, a traditional
event (or practice) at the subject institution, was regularly cited by study participants as a major influence on their decision or interest in a recognized student organization on campus. It is important to reflect on institutional practices and consider their influence on student involvement. Future reflection is needed on institutional policies, as well. Overall, Astin’s theory emphasizes the importance of student engagement on a student’s collegiate success, and this study reinforced the guiding principles of that theory.

Student engagement predominantly focuses upon increasing student achievement and learning, creating an atmosphere focused on developing positive behaviors and transferable skills, and infusing a sense of belonging in students. It appears that students who actively engage in campus activities and programs, such as student organizations, are more likely to learn, grow, and develop, which supports their overall success. Students could articulate their own understanding and comprehension about participating in one or more student organizations. Students may not use specific higher education vernacular when explaining their rationale for joining, but students certainly verbalized specific reasons for deciding to join and for remaining committed to student organizations.

After careful consideration of the findings, existing knowledge, and relevant literature, it is evident that students find involvement with student organizations to be important. Student affairs practitioners need to understand student organization programs holistically, as well as the specific reasons students join, so they can enhance future practices and research into the higher education learning environment. The next section offers recommendations for practice, followed by suggestions for future research.
Recommendations for Practice

This study engaged with students, through active listening and purposeful dialogue, about their reasons for joining clubs and organizations. Based on the outcomes of this study, three specific recommendations for practice are offered for the subject university. Each of these recommendations aims at developing and effectively managing a comprehensive student organization or campus activities program on a college campus. The three recommendations evolving from the research are: (a) understanding the relationship between student organizations and student engagement, (b) utilizing student organizations to develop skills, and (c) understanding student organizations’ role in developing student leaders.

Relationship between Student Organizations and Student Engagement

Student organizations are critical for initial and sustained student involvement activity that enhances student engagement through a sense of belonging and peer influence. One of the most compelling findings of this study is the role that student organizations play in developing a sense of belonging with an institution and also connectedness among peers. There are a number of different opportunities within higher education to strengthen student engagement, but this study emphasizes the effectiveness of student organization involvement as a tool for developing a sense of belonging among students and for student success.

It is critical for colleges and universities to understand how involvement with student organizations develops student engagement opportunities, which influence student retention and persistence rates. Higher levels of retention and persistence generally equate to connectedness and success (Astin, 1984, Kuh, 2009). Often, students arrive on campus looking for ways to connect and engage with their peers and new academic community. Zacherman and Foubert (2014) emphasized how research has validated the correlation of involvement with a sense of
belonging, stating: “Studies have shown that interaction with other students is beneficial to adjustment to college. Having friends in college was positively correlated with adjustment to the college environment” (p. 158). Accordingly, this study heard from students that student organizations were valuable in helping them connect with peers, colleagues, and the academic institution, particularly in developing their social network. As Strayhorn (2018) remarked, it is when students “feel supported socially that the real magic happens” (p. 3). These connections evolve with peers, faculty, and staff on our college campuses. Practitioners also need to understand the importance of “feeling supported” for students of underrepresented populations at predominantly white institutions (PWI). Student organizations can serve as an effective tool for all students in developing belongingness, but is particularly important for underrepresented students at PWIs.

Ultimately, the results of this study validate the role that student organizations play in the level of investment in a student’s academic journey, given the correlation between belongingness and an increase in student engagement. The study’s focus groups consistently articulated the connections made with a club or organization by student participants, along with the relatedness they experienced because of their involvement with student organizations. As higher education professionals consider purposeful activities associated with engaging students in their own success, consideration of the role that student organizations play in establishing their sense of belonging with the institution is essential.

A sense of belonging contributes to students’ investment in their academic experiences, as well as retention and persistence rates. Students thrive when invested in their experiences, resulting in improvements in retention and persistence. As Gieg, Oyarzum, Reardon, and Gant (2015) stated: “A highly involved student likely spends much time on campus, frequently
interacts with faculty and other students, and participates actively in student organizations. These attributes positively influence students’ sense of belonging” (p. 1). It is critical that practitioners recognize the effect that student organization involvement can have in garnering a sense of belonging for students and use those organizations as part of retention initiatives. Higher education institutions are aware of the importance of analyzing how best to provide opportunities for student success, and need to identify student organizations as a best practice for supporting a student’s engagement with their academic journey.

It is also important to identify best practices for marketing student organization involvement early on. For example, the student participants consistently commented how the student organization recruitment event, the subject university’s student involvement fair, was a great opportunity to learn about opportunities, acquire more in-depth information about student organizations, and meet peers to connect with. The rewards for both students and institutions can be profound and measurable with respect to student organization programs, as heard from the students who participated in this study.

Conclusions from this study reinforce the idea that student organization involvement does contribute to students developing a sense of belonging, which has a lasting influence on student engagement and their success. Therefore, professionals working in educational settings need to understand the contributions that a well-designed student organization program has on an inclusive learning environment from both a programmatic and community-building point of view. By explaining why students join student organizations, the results inform practice, particularly when the student voice emphasizes how student organizations are responsible for their sense of belonging with others and the institution. As a practice, it is important that higher
education institutions identify both fiscal and personnel resources that support the building of sustainable student organizations on college campuses.

**Utilizing Student Organizations for Skill Development**

Student organizations can increase belongingness, but there are additional assets beyond belonging that make student organizations a critical component of the collegiate learning environment. Previous research has focused on how skill development is a result of participation in one or more student organizations (Bowman & Seifert, 2011; Foubert & Grainger, 2006; Smith & Chenworth, 2015; Zacherman & Foubert, 2014). Zacherman and Foubert (2014) specified, “Astin found that students who participated in clubs and organizations showed an increase in both leadership and interpersonal skills” (p. 158). Additional research has emphasized that students who participate in student organizations experience improvements in specific development areas, such as cognitive skills (Gellin, 2003), interpersonal skills (Huang & Chang, 2004), and developmental skills (Foubert & Grainger, 2006). Moreover, research has highlighted that students get an opportunity to apply practical skills when they are involved with student organizations (Foubert & Grainger, 2006); these include skills learned about in and outside of the classroom. This study supports previous research findings by highlighting the ability for student participants to articulate their skill development following their involvement with student organizations, including communicating clearly, good people skills, and the competence to navigate difficult situations.

As noted by Webber, Bauer Krylow, and Zhang (2013), “Greater involvement can help students focus and synthesize thoughts, strengthen academic preparations, and ultimately develop skills that earn academic benefits” (p. 608). It is critical that professionals consider incorporating best practices for developing a comprehensive student organization or campus
activities program, which includes skill development for students. As participants shared, student organizations serve as safe environments where they put what they learned both in and out of the classroom into practice. Additionally, student participants remarked how involvement with student organizations prepared them for life after college, where they could apply what they learned without some of the risks of the “real-world,” like losing a job. Furthermore, institutional NSSE data corroborated the development of skills, particularly when comparing freshmen and senior year responses.

College graduates expect to acquire the skills necessary for future employment, for acceptance into graduate schools, to perform job responsibilities, and to support career advancement. Additionally, as Rosenberg, Heimler, and Mororte (2012) explained, employers expect college graduates to have the skills necessary to perform a job’s required tasks. Therefore, it is important that students have environments that support the development of skills and that students be able to explain how the skills they acquired through co-curricular experiences are transferable to a specific job application or graduate school program. Focus group participants articulated that student organizations provide the environment they need to learn, practice, and develop skills. In understanding the reasons why students join student organizations, it is essential that student affairs practitioners recognize that students identify student organizations as platforms for career preparation and development. Moreover, it is evident from the research that students can identify skill development that is derived from their involvement and are able to explain how they successfully used certain skills as members and leaders of their organizations. Given the results of this study regarding the acquisition of skills, it is important for higher education professionals to implement assessment practices that analyze student skill development following their student organization involvement. As higher education works to
achieve success in developing the next generation of students, such assessments are imperative. These assessments would highlight the importance of student organization involvement as an experiential learning opportunity and also identify skills needing improvement. In addition, these assessments would provide a necessary source of data for understanding the effect on a student’s overall development. The data would also reinforce the rationale for budgetary requests, along with distinguishing where support is needed to enhance a student organization program. Finally, these assessments provide an understanding for practitioners on how the experiential learning environment of student organizations strengthens the academic core.

Understanding Student Organizations Role for Developing Leaders

A healthy balance between academics and co-curricular activities is important, and choosing a student organization that benefits a student’s development is a way to achieve that balance while developing students into leaders of the future. It is critical that educational practitioners understand the influence that student organizations have on leadership development.

By understanding the potential for leadership development through student organization involvement, student affairs professionals augment classroom content by building foundations for experiential learning. “Students learn about leadership models, theories, and best practices in classrooms. They engage in leadership development opportunities in their co-curricular activities” (Smith & Chenworth, 2015). Smith and Chenworth (2015) reported that participants, recent college graduates, expressed how their leadership roles in co-curricular activities had a significant influence on their development of leadership skills. Furthermore, their participants felt that as a result they were prepared for their post-graduate jobs, which contributed to their
professional success (Smith & Chenworth, 2015). Smith and Chenworth (2015) also discovered the effects of involvement on student leadership behaviors. The study ascertained: Students active in co-curricular organizations rated themselves significantly more positively on having stronger people skills, serving as a model for others, dealing well with stress, dealing effectively with failure, resolving conflict, communicating clearly, working effectively in teams, and being a good listener (Smith and Chenworth, 2015, p. 285).

As participants in this study shared, student organizations provided them with opportunities to serve in leadership roles that helped them practice skills and define who they were as a leader. For example, Ethan shared how his leadership position in student government shaped his beliefs in leadership and helped him define what leadership meant for him. Furthermore, students stated that they joined student organizations because they offered an opportunity to grow and learn as leaders. Student affairs professionals must recognize that student organizations enhance the development of student leaders and therefore support the growth and advancement of student organization programs.

As a recommendation, academics and student affairs must work collaboratively to elevate students’ leadership potential through student organizations. This collaborative approach fosters a rich learning environment for students and is beneficial for student development. First, recognition of the need for this partnership in a student’s academic journey is imperative. Both academic and student affairs professionals enhance the life of students, and when efforts are combined to develop robust learning environments, the impact on a student’s leadership development is profound. Second, it is crucial to recognize the importance of assessing the development of leadership skills, to validate them in both curricular and co-curricular settings, and to identify areas of potential growth. Furthermore, as Smith and Chenworth (2015) noted:
Using assessment of leadership learning outcomes as an intentional means of pairing the two sides of learning – the thinking and the doing – holds promise for making the student experience cohesive and the staff experience collaborative, enriching the involvement of all invested groups (p. 286).

This study supports the recognition of student organizations as a gateway for developing individual students’ leadership potential. It is imperative that faculty and staff work together to firmly develop areas of growth in learning and development for students who are involved with campus clubs and organizations. Student affairs professionals need to develop relationships with academics and traditional classroom instructors to supplement students’ knowledge acquisition with leadership development opportunities outside of the expected pedagogy. Equally, faculty members need to recognize that learning takes place outside the classroom and develop relationships with their student affairs colleagues so that students’ academic journeys are enriched through involvement with campus clubs and organizations.

Student organizations foster the acquisition of knowledge; leadership training and development; and the application of soft skills, such as problem solving, time management, communication. These improve the preparation of future leaders. Importantly, as participants shared in focus groups, students acknowledge that student organizations serve as a gateway for leadership development. College staff and administrators now have a responsibility to embrace that same belief in student organizations and to identify ways to design student organization programs that develop the leaders of tomorrow.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

Student engagement is an essential component of higher education. Institutions are constantly looking for ways to affect a student’s overall academic experience by promoting
growth, learning, and development. This study examined the reasons why students decided to join student organizations, and with that examination came a better understanding of the role of engagement with student organizations on college campuses. While the results of this study provide a strong knowledge base for student organization programmatic development, specific areas remain in need of further research.

First, this was a case study conducted at a single university in western New York. It is important to conduct future research to learn whether the results of this study are consistent at other institutions of higher education with similar research focuses. Conducting similar studies at other institutions would validate the results beyond the findings of this study, increasing its credibility. Similar studies would result in addressing the scholar practitioner role on a national level among different institutional demographics, including diverse student populations.

Second, over half of the participants served in leadership roles within their student organizations. Certainly, this study’s research is important to developing a holistic perspective on clubs and organizations. Nevertheless, research also needs to examine whether there are differences between student organization leaders and the general membership of a student organization. Specifically, future research needs to scrutinize how different levels of involvement effect sense of belonging, skill development, and leadership growth. It is important to understand whether there are any variances based on levels of involvement and roles or whether outcomes are consistent with the findings of this research regardless of serving as a leader or general member. The results of a study examining membership levels among student organizations could have a profound impact on future practice, particularly in regards to the best practices for developing strong, comprehensive student organization programs.
Third, determining why students do not get involved with student organizations is critical to understanding student engagement. This study engaged in preliminary discussion of this perspective with participants, but did not go into significant depth on the subject. Research conducted on understanding why students have never joined a student organization or gotten involved in any co-curricular activity is valuable. It is important to understand why that might be, and how potential changes in the programmatic perspectives of student organizations could result in increased involvement among all students. This research focus would also explore whether demographics have any correlation with not getting involved.

In addition, there are data points utilized in this study that need further investigation. For example, some factors in the 2017 NSSE data appear to have inconsistencies, such as the time spent on co-curricular activities and the institutional emphasis on social involvements. For example, a significant chi-square is evident in the senior year in relation to time spent on co-curricular activities and providing opportunities to be involved socially, but there is not a significant relationship for freshmen. Future research may want to explore why this is and what initiatives could be introduced that would contribute to changing that relationship for freshmen. Additionally, there is a significant chi-square for freshmen relative to time spent on co-curricular activities and an evaluation of one’s entire education experience at the subject university, but not for seniors. While the freshmen significance supports the rationale for joining a student organization, practitioners may want to analyze more deeply what happens between freshmen and senior year that changes the correlation between co-curricular activities and evaluation of the educational experience. These results may not specifically affect a student’s decision to join a student organization, but they are worthy of further examination because it is essential that practitioners fully understand what is causing the change over time.
These inconsistencies are not enough to provide wide concern about the validity of the study, but they do offer areas needing further exploration and potential improvement that could influence engagement with student organizations in the future. They provide an opportunity to learn why there is not a significant relationship between those two items for freshmen. This would show how best to develop initiatives that would influence the development of a relationship between co-curricular involvement and social involvement for freshmen.

Finally, given the key findings of this study about why students join student organizations, a deeper dive is required for appreciating the relationship between sense of belonging and equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) initiatives. This study provided a foundational perspective on why students join a student organization, but future research needs to uncover different perspectives that may exist when utilizing an EDI lens. As Kuh (2009) suggested, “Engaging in educationally purposeful activities helps to level the playing field, especially for students from low-income family backgrounds and others who have been historically underserved” (p.698). A full understanding of the effect of student organizations on a sense of belonging among underrepresented student populations is critically important. Student organizations are a vital part of collegiate life, are effective means for developing inclusive campus cultures, and deliver opportunities for connectedness.

Student organizations provide environments permeated with learning, development, and growth for college students. It is important for institutions of higher education to recognize the importance of intentional educational activity, such as student organizations, that augment traditional pedagogy. For colleges and universities, club and organizations are a gateway to belonging, practicing skills, and experiential learning. As one student shared:
Don't be afraid to get invested in something as a freshman. Sometimes people just kind of test out a student organization, but don't put the full effort in. Also for any incoming freshmen who are too cool for student organization involvement, they need to remember it is never uncool to be passionate about something. For me, my student organization was where I wanted to be. I invested myself in it, and that investment gave me great returns and opened the door to new opportunities. During every graduate school interview, I talk about my student organization experiences and use them as specific examples. I put all my time and effort into engaged with my student organization and I got something out of it. My advice to new students would be to just try it, and really invest in it when given the opportunity. The rewards are worth it.

Taking part in a student organization enriches a student’s collegiate experience. Campus clubs and organizations provide circumstances for gaining skills, making connections, and expanding knowledge. Overall, this supports the development of all students, preparing them for their futures.
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Appendix A: Recruitment Email

Recruitment Email

Dear Student (will insert a student name here):

I am recruiting participants to take part in a study that I am conducting as part of my doctoral research at Northeastern University. The study seeks to learn more about why students decide to participate in a student organization at The College at Brockport. I will be conducting focus group interviews for each of the following councils: Club Sports, Fraternity & Sorority Life, Academic, Cultural, Service and Fine Arts. According to campus information, you are identified as a member of (insert specific council here). The interviews will last no more than one hour and will serve to help make improvements to our campus’s student organization program. Participation is voluntary. The time and location for the focus group for (insert Council name here) is (date/time/location inserted here).

Please confirm that you can join me, and if you wish to learn more about this study, please do not hesitate to contact me in Student Union & Activities. Please email me at hainseki@husky.neu.edu. Thank you for considering your participation in this study.

Sincerely,

Kim Haines
Northeastern Doctor of Education Student
Appendix B: Informed Consent Form

Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies, Doctor of Education

Name of Investigator(s): Dr. Brian Bicknell, Principal Investigator and Kimberley Haines, Student Researcher

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study

You are invited to take part in a research study. This form will outline specific details of the study, but the student researcher will explain it to you first. You may ask this person any questions that you have. When you are ready to make a decision, you may tell the researcher if you want to participate or not. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. If you decide to participate, the researcher will ask you to sign this statement and will give you a copy to keep.

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?

You are being asked to participate in this study because you are a member of one of following student organization councils at the institution: Club Sports, Fraternity & Sorority, Academic, Fine Arts, Service, and Cultural, and the research hopes to learn more about the student decision to get involved with student organizations.

Why is this research study being done?

The purpose of this case study is to investigate why undergraduate students participate in student organizations, and how that information might inform best practices related to student organization programs at this particular institution. For this study, the student researcher is interested in learning ways to improve student organization programs for students to grow, learn, and develop as a result of their involvement.

What will I be asked to do?

If you decide to take part in this study, you will be asked a number of questions as part of a focus group interview that will last no more than one hour. Focus group interviews are conducted with a group of individuals to better understand opinions, perceptions, beliefs and attitudes related to a topic in order to make improvements.

Where will this take place and how much of my time will it take?

You will be interviewed in at an established time and location that works for the student organization council. The interview will take about one hour. Following the interview, you will be emailed a copy of the transcription to proof and provide feedback to the student researcher if you so chose.

Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?
There is no foreseeable risk or discomfort, that is perceived to exist as a result of this study. However, at any time should you need assistance, please let a researcher know or contact the Counseling Center at (585) 395-2590.

**Will I benefit by being in this research?**

There will be no direct benefit to you for taking part in the study. However, the information from the study will help to develop a more robust student organization program for future students at the institution.

**Who will see the information about me?**

Your part in this study will be confidential following the focus group interview. Only the researchers on this study will see the information about you. No reports or publications will use information that can identify you as being part of this study. Following interviews, each participant will be provided a pseudonym to protect individual identities.

**Can I stop my participation in this study?**

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate if you do not want to and you can refuse to answer any question. Even if you begin the study, you may quit at any time. If you do not participate or if you decide to quit, you will not lose any rights, benefits, or services that you would otherwise have.

**Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?**

If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Kimberley Haines at (585) 395-2539, the person mainly responsible for the research. You can also contact Dr. Brian Bicknell at b.bicknell@northeastern.edu, the Principal Investigator.

**Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?**

If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, Mail Stop: 560-177, 360 Huntington Avenue, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617.373.4588, Email: n.regina@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

**I agree to take part in this research.**

_________________________________________  ________________

Signature of person [parent] agreeing to take part  Date
Printed name of person above

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Signature of person who explained the study to the participant above and obtained consent

Date

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Printed name of person above

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Appendix C  Interview Protocol and Questions

Student Organizations Interview Protocol and Questions

Institution: ________________________________________________________________

Focus Group Interviewees (Title and Name):

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

Interviewer: ______________________________________________________________

RESEARCH QUESTION: Why do students join student organizations? ________________

Part I:

Introductory Session Objectives (5-7 minutes):

- Build rapport with participants by:
  - Describing the study
  - Answer any questions
  - Asking participants to review and sign an informed consent form

Introductory Protocol

You have been selected to speak with me today because you have been identified as someone who has a great deal to share about being involved with student organizations at The College at Brockport. My research project focuses on the experience of students who have been involved with a student organization(s) in one of the six identified student organization councils: Club Sports, Fraternity & Sorority Life, Fine Arts, Academic, Cultural and Service. Through this study, I hope to gain more insight into what attracts students to join student organizations. Hopefully, this will allow me to identify ways in which I can further develop a robust and comprehensive program for student organizations on this campus.
Because your responses are important and I want to make sure to capture everything you say, I would like to audio tape our conversation today. Do I have your permission to record this interview?[if yes, the participants will be thanked, and then the interviewer will turn on the recording equipment].

I will also be taking written notes. I can assure you that all responses will be confidential and only a pseudonym will be used when quoting what each of you states from the transcripts. I will be the only one privy to the tapes and they will be destroyed after six months. To meet our human subjects requirements, you must sign the informed consent form I have with me. Essentially, this document states that: (1) all information will be held confidential, (2) your participation is voluntary and you may stop at any time if you feel uncomfortable, and (3) we do not intend to inflict any harm. Do you have any questions about the interview process or how your data will be used?

This interview should last about 45 - 60 minutes. During this time, I have several questions that I would like to cover. If time begins to run short, it may be necessary to interrupt you in order to push ahead and complete this line of questioning. Do you have any questions at this time?

Part II: Interviewee Background (5-10 minutes)

Objective: To establish rapport and obtain the story of in the participants’ general with the research topic. This section should be brief as it is not the focus of the study.

A. Interviewee Background

To begin, I would like you to go back to when you were a new student at the college:

1. Can you describe how you felt and what you were thinking in terms of getting involved on campus?
2. What were some things you were interested in learning more about or participating in during your college experiences?

Part 2:

One of the things I am interested in learning about is what attracts students to join a student organization. I would like to hear about your perspective/experience about student organizations involvement, in your own words, and how that has impacted your collegiate experience. To do this, I am going to ask you some questions about the key experiences you encountered. If you mention other people, please do not mention names. Rather, say that you are giving the person a pseudonym.

When considering your involvement outside of the traditional classroom, I would like to learn more about your experiences, specifically with student organizations.

3. Describe for me how you first learned about getting involved with student organizations and how they were introduced to you on campus?
4. Please describe what some of your key reasons were for choosing to participate with a student organization(s)? And why you might have chosen not to join others?
5. Describe what some of the activities and events were that you were involved with through student organizations?
   a. How or why did some of these activities influence your decision to participate or remain active in the organization?

6. Please describe some of the skills have you learned as a result of your involvement with student organizations and how they might be useful to your future success?

In closing, and in considering future students and the impact of involvement with student organizations on their learning experiences:

7. Given your participation in student organizations, what are the reasons you would tell another student to consider joining a student organization?

Ask participant if they have any questions and thank them for their participation.
Appendix D: Northeastern IRB Approval

NOTIFICATION OF IRB ACTION
Date: March 23, 2018
IRB #: CPS18-03-05
Principal Investigator(s): Brian Bicknell
Kimberley Haines
Department: Doctor of Education Program
College of Professional Studies
Address: 20 Belvidere
Northeastern University
Title of Project: Student Perspectives on Joining Student Organizations
Participating Sites: College at Brockport permission forthcoming
DHHS Review Category: Expedited #6, #7
Informed Consents: One (1) signed consent form
Monitoring Interval: 12 months
APPROVAL EXPIRATION DATE: MARCH 22, 2019

Investigator’s Responsibilities:
1. The informed consent form bearing the IRB approval stamp must be used when recruiting participants into the study.
2. The investigator must notify IRB immediately of unexpected adverse reactions, or new information that may alter our perception of the benefit-risk ratio.
3. Study procedures and files are subject to audit any time.
4. Any modifications of the protocol or the informed consent as the study progresses must be reviewed and approved by this committee prior to being instituted.
5. Continuing Review Approval for the proposal should be requested at least one month prior to the expiration date above.
6. This approval applies to the protection of human subjects only. It does not apply to any other university approvals that may be necessary.

C. Randall Colvin, Ph.D., Chair
Northeastern University Institutional Review Board

Nan C. Regina, Director
Human Subject Research Protection

Northeastern University FWA #4630