

**Combined Notes from five small groups at Student-Faculty Conversation on Learning: Learning Outcomes from Involvement in RSOs. Organized by general topic area.  
February 11, 2011**

**Why join or be involved in RSOs?**

- Because they have friends in the organization.
- Interested in what organization does/activities.
- Start an RSO on something not already in existence.
- RSO is connected to major so good on resume.
- Social reasons, fun stuff to do.
- RSOs can be multifaceted, multi-purposed.
- May join for extrinsic reasons but later have intrinsic motivation.
- Role of an RSO
  - Connection to classroom learning
    - Do we make this deliberate or do we expect students to make these connections themselves?
  - Not all RSOs are set up for this naturally
  - Produces more out of class learning such as conflict management, event planning, etc.
  
- People see the direct link between academic/co-curricular but the topic is not direct in conversations within the RSOs
- Social network & connection to University = biggest benefits of RSOs/co-curricular
- Professional preparation (mostly from RSO)/ professional organizations, not classes
- RSO's serve an advocacy role for members of a group with similar interests
- RSO's serve as a place to build community/relate to others
- RSO's allow students to create a relationship with the university, participate and be active on campus with a group of people who share similar beliefs
- RSO's help "sell" the university to the local community as members in the RSO have commitments that extend beyond the campus and beyond themselves
  - a lot of learning opportunities: budgeting, interpersonal communication, leadership
  - can reflect the values of the university mission
  - opportunity to put learning into practice
  - make mistakes without "real world" penalty
  - employers find this attractive
  - can relate to majors: career preparation,
  - trips and exposure off campus
  - professional associations/organizations
  - less "class-home"
  - practical experience related to what is being learned in class and/or a way to connect to campus
  - assists in the transition to college
  - help students feel more connected-increased retention

**What do students learn in RSOs?**

- Cognitive: practice concepts, knowledge gained through trial and error, guest speakers, event planning, presenting information to others, (L&S Floor) service project, learn about nonprofit organization, social issues that service is addressing

- Affective: gained through advising, asking/answering questions with advisor, challenging students to learn about themselves/others, challenge diverse comments about diversity, personal responsibility and responsibility with others; (L&S Floor) programming based on personal awareness, start here as foundation
- Life skills: L&S Floor: time management, service, career preparation; UPB: event management, time management, budgeting, committee/group work, learning how to work in a “structured structure”, following directions; Fraternity: personal accountability between each other as a group, running the organization, managing budgets
- RSOs and the classroom
  - One RSO advisor encourages students within the group to form study groups and these out-of-class relationships carry over into the classroom
  - Another advisor asks students to connect leadership roles in the RSO to their individual majors...creating a different experience for each person
  - Another advisor plans to create a class to train leaders in the functions necessary for the RSO as a group rather than spending time with each leader individually
  - RSO’s provide a stepping off place for leadership in professional associations and future careers.
  - Experiences students gain from RSO’s enhance affective development (self-awareness, organization/time management, confidence)
- Running a mini-corporation (budgeting, planning, events)
- Being in a fraternity helped get a position (transferrable skills)
- Moving skills from experience to the job
- Transferrable skills
- Articulating personal strengths and values
- Articulating personal awareness
- Recruiting others to join
- Communicating clearly with others
- Academic skills
- Disciplinary knowledge
- Ethics, values, sportsmanship
- Leadership skills
- Communication skills
- Conflict management
- Budgeting
- Event planning
- Teamwork
- An interesting concept is the learning that takes place by officers of an organization vs. members of an organization.
  - Officers are designed to get more out of the experience, because they have more responsibility.
  - Are some students there just to put something on their resume, or do they really care?
    - This depends a lot on the type of organization it is.

- Learning Outcomes
  - Important to ask the students “What do you want out of this experience”. Do we do that enough? (Making it transparent)
    - This is a hard to get answers to because when you ask, most students won’t answer.
    - One approach could be making this a topic of discussion among small groups, students seem more likely to discuss in these situations.
  - Do we set expectations for our students?
    - Does this just add more to their plate, and take away the fun of just being a part of the group?
  - Do we push students out of their comfort zones?
    - Maybe it should just be about providing the opportunity for them to choose to step outside of their comfort zone, not a force.

**Do we know and how do we know? Assessment.**

- But do we know, how do we know what students learn?
- How may RSOs actually do assessment or SoTL on learning outcomes?
- What about having students do reflections?
- Other methods could be interviews or focus groups or surveys.
- This would be self report, student perceptions rather than direct measures of learning.
- Such data would be useful for many purposes.
- Are we assessing what outcomes the organization is achieving?
- This can be done formally and informally
  - Setting expectations up front
  - Building into learning outcomes
  - Finding fun ways to assess so it doesn’t feel like “work”
  - Would be good to find fun ways to help students assess
  - Make assessment more relevant to students
  - Help them understand that assessment is what can help them improve the organization
- Learning is enhanced by offering students opportunities such as making grant dates available on the calendar on the website and then having a direct link from the calendar to the grant application
- Technology offers transparency in what is possible to be learned
- More opportunities could be provided for RSO leadership to come together and discuss what they are learning collectively. Many students do not recognize learning until after the fact.
- Can advisors help students document/understand what they have done and learned? We need to help students make connections between what they do and what they take away from their experiences.
- Students belong to multiple organizations. Do they see a connection between them?
- Reflection or recapping is necessary after each event to review both the content of what happened or what was learned and the process of how things happened and what could be translated into their other experiences or organizations in the future.
- Mentorship by advisors is powerful because they help students build confidence and challenge students to go beyond their comfort zones, interacting with students of different racial, gender, ability backgrounds and challenging what they think they know.
- Have articulated learning outcomes on Leadership & Service Floor: leadership, self knowledge, connecting beliefs with actions
- Learning about leadership skills/styles

- Learning about self: beliefs, passions, values, awareness, actions
- UPB: student run organization develops own goals and learning outcomes; these are student-generated
- Advisors involved in UPB to provide guidance
- Try to assist students with assessment as a “real world” necessity
- In fraternity help students understand that learning outcomes should come from the values of the organization
- Values should inform outcomes when possible
  
- Student GPA’s pre and post involvement in the RSO
- Assessing student development beginning of the year and at the end. How did students do when they came in and how are they now when they are leaving?
- Advisor documents things they have seen students learn throughout the year and discuss these points at the end of each semester and/or school year with each student.
- It is difficult to document learning in this way. Students can point to learning experiences, but how can they be measured?
- Cognitive outcomes are more easily measured...they are concrete and have instruments already developed.
- Affective outcomes could be measured through reflective activities (writing, speaking).
- One advisor asked students attending a leadership conference to write pre-attendance expectations and goals/outcomes for the conference, then after the conference to write an evaluation of how they met/accomplished their goals and why they did not.

### **What is involvement?**

- What does it mean to be involved in an RSO?
- Probably varies by RSO.
- Some RSOs use involvement point systems, have dues, give awards...
- Minimal involvement may be ok for some RSOs - attend an occasional meeting; others would require much more.
- Anecdotally seems like ISU students are not in RSOs or in several--bimodal.
- Link officer positions to students' skills and majors.
- Important for students to control the RSO.
- Student empowerment is important.
- reinforces critical thinking/decision making
- hone critical thinking skills through RSOs
- Kolb’s learning cycle reinforced through experience/involvement in RSO
- Can practice/utilize techniques learned in class
- May repeat/model things learned in class in a way which reinforces the concepts
- Students can supplement “life roles” if not completely academically satisfied they may reinforce/gain fulfillment elsewhere (in RSOs)
  
- Officers learn: teamwork, balancing levels of commitment from other members, and conflict
  
- On L&S floor (some students didn’t “choose this) this is true for most students, especially the students that want to be there.
- Some students connect better time management through organizations with academic success

- But over involvement can hurt students academically
- Meaningful activity and involvement is most key; if involvement isn't meaningful other endeavors take students away from academic success
- Changing the paradigm of what college "should be" toward meaningful involvement will help academic success
- UPB draws out super motivated people; meaningful involvement gives these students purpose
- Meaningful activity=reflection component/time for reflection
- Media misportrays college; need a way to show students what success and meaningful involvement looks like
- Educate students during their transition what college process is and how to fit the components together (meaningful activities & involvement will help you graduate!)
- Not always communicated. More often "This organization is FUN!" or "This will help your resume"
- Need to find other ways to educate students about meaningful opportunities outside of resumes, etc.
- Not "marketed" to students by learning outcomes "You will do better academically by joining these organizations"
- Be specific about meaningful involvement; give examples; help students understand
  
- Leadership & Service Floor: 1 service project per month; in addition try to be involved in DOS service projects; reinforce the learning of social issues; what did you see/ hear/talk about before; students learn doing as well as factual knowledge
- Reflection is critical component of making these activities work; give students time to reflect and grasp this for themselves; need to let them develop themselves
- Fraternity have philanthropy hours/national and ISU requirements; Values need to be incorporated into learning of service; service is important value;
- Understand that giving back to the communities you're in as important
- UPB: challenged to do civic and service activities b/c of how they're funded (student fee \$ need to be spent on students on campus); but could do this as a group/social
- Over-programmed: students last thing on their mind is giving back. Need to encourage them to do civic engagement because valuable learning can occur

### **What are barriers to student involvement or learning in RSOs?**

- Some students choose to focus only on formal academics.
- Lack of time.
- Different priorities.
- Conflicting role demands (work, parent).
- Commuting.
- Monetary costs of some RSOs.
- Don't know anyone in the RSO.
- Name of the organization – a student may assume just on the name that it does not meet his or her needs or interests
- Time for meetings – if a meeting is held at the same time and a student has a conflict they cannot be involved; hard to find a time to meet everyone's schedule
- Don't expect learning – if a student walks into an organization and does not expect learning to occur, will it?
- Students are too busy or have a conflict
- Most don't see RSO as opp. for learning

- Names of RSOs can create barrier
- Over-involvement; trying to do too much; students too involved to spend enough time reflecting; then cannot articulate what they've learned and from where
- If you are doing X in 5 organizations, then what are you learning? Why all 5? When learning the same skills in one; if involved in more than one then perform different roles in each organization and limit the number of organizations that students are involved in
- Don't push themselves to make connections w/themselves and others because they are too busy
- Multiple organizations with the same goal/theme because people can easily start their "own"
- Need to combine the organizations that are working on the same things
- Gets back to student's intentions for being involved: for your resume versus learning versus being in charge
- Distinguish "power" (being in charge) from learning in RSOs
- Some organizations are so "fun" that there isn't much learning involved; this may be a more "social" learning: but still attempt legitimacy with the tools provided
- Learning instead of just meeting; need to meet with purpose not just meet to meet; advisors can assist with this
- Member vs. officer > What does it mean to be a member? Require?
- Students in general are not challenged to go out of their comfort zones. RSO advisors should do that.
- Advisors also need to know how to support students by understanding them and what their level of comfort is.
- Students are afraid "not to know" something and they rely on "what we have always done" when making decisions about their organization.
- Students fear change.
- Students often are unaware of what they have learned until it's pointed out because some initially join groups for social reasons.
- History is a barrier because typically in an RSO the history and knowledge of the past is held by the advisor. Students should be in control of the organization...they should run the meetings.
- Advisors need to know how to balance challenging and supporting students, but it is hard to know when to let students fail.

### **What is role of faculty/staff adviser?**

- May depend on 'stage' of development of the RSO, complexity of RSO activities, whether officers are new or returning...
- Can be hard to find advisers.
- Advisers range from those who just sign forms to those who may be too involved/in charge.
- How do we encourage faculty and staff to be advisers?
- How involved are the advisors/how involved should the advisor be?
- What difference does it make for an organization when it is a faculty advisor vs. a staff advisor?
- Relationships with advisors/professors
  - Students need/seek guidance from these individuals
  - Students and faculty: advisors have to be involved (not just sign things) for these relationships to build; great to have an opportunity to interact outside of class; enhances relationship in the classroom; advising can allow to see another side of

faculty; “it takes two”; faculty are very busy but need to be involved in student’s lives; bridges between academic and student affairs; example of teaching a class in a fraternity house (instead of a classroom); help faculty understand that relationships with students outside of class can help relationships inside the classroom; students may have to reach out to faculty and ask them to get involved with their organization

- Students and students: students learn from each other; gets students to interact with people they wouldn’t have been friends with-real world!

### **How can we enhance learning in RSOs and other Suggestions**

- Set expectations and recognize mission of RSO from day 1 with members AND follow up later
- Create opportunities (options to be outside comfort zone)
- We need to ask students what they want/expect
- Direction or support from advisor
  - Sometimes “hidden” in incentives=free food
  - Could be more transparent through modeling behavior
  - Doing while learning
  - Active experiences that provide learning opportunities
  - Articulation=telling people what you’ve learned; while its helpful
  - Articulating the value of experiences to others
- Workshop (CTLT) on assessing learning and developmental outcomes of involvement in RSOs.
- Faculty/staff adviser training sessions.
- Helping students realize what they are learning in RSOs through reflection or other means.
- Making RSOs, and their structure and leadership and activities and culture, sustainable.
  - RSOs cannot be advisor driven. It is a Registered Student Organization, not a Registered Advisor/Professional Organization.
  - How & when do we allow students to fail? Failing can be a tool to teach them to learn from mistakes.