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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Encouraging Participation in Enriching Educational Experiences – Co-Curricular Activities and Community Service**

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### *Institutional Analysis and Student Affairs*

Results from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) suggest that UB students are less likely to participate in co-curricular and community service and volunteer activities than are students at peer institutions. The purpose of our research with *UB Advocates* (trained student volunteers) was to examine students' motivations for participating in these activities, as well as the effectiveness of existing advertising and marketing campaigns.

Three focus groups were conducted to collect data from 17 participants. First, these students completed a questionnaire about their participation in these activities and the perceived importance of each to educational goals. Then, they engaged in a focus group discussion in which they were asked about their motivations for participation, activities that command their free time, and effective advertising and marketing techniques. An additional 32 *UB Advocates* who were unable to attend a focus group session participated by completing an on-line survey which contained questions parallel to those asked on the questionnaire and in the focus groups discussions. The data presented here are based on the responses of the 49 participants.

Based on these students' responses to our questions, we can conclude the following:

- The majority of students are active in co-curricular activities and community service and volunteer projects, and they participate for positive reasons (e.g., meeting new people, impacting their community, helping others, developing career-related skills) rather than simply because they receive free food, money, or prizes.
- Students who are not involved in these activities have good reasons, such as studying, working for pay, and “de-stressing.” Most of our Advocates do not perceive students who are not actively involved on campus as spending all of their free time “doing nothing.”
- An activity with a limited time commitment may be most appealing for students (e.g., one day rather than an ongoing activity).
- Effective advertising and marketing materials use all possible media sources and are targeted to appeal to individual interests. In addition, these materials emphasize the benefits that are most important to students (e.g., meeting new people or developing career-related skills).

## **BRIEF: Encouraging Participation in Enriching Educational Experiences – Co-Curricular Activities and Community Service**

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In spring 2008, UB freshmen and seniors were recruited to participate in the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). Results indicate that UB students have a lower score on the Enriching Educational Experiences benchmark than their peers at comparable institutions. This benchmark includes a variety of different campus activities, including co-curricular activities, community service and volunteering, study abroad, practical or field experiences, independent study, participation in learning communities, and several others. A closer examination of results revealed that there were four primary areas where UB students report less participation than students at peer institutions: participation in co-curricular activities, community service and volunteering, practical and field experiences, and study abroad. This brief describes research efforts to examine more closely student participation in co-curricular activities and community service and volunteering.

### *Participants and Procedures*

We conducted 3 focus groups with 17 UB Advocates<sup>1</sup>. In addition, students from the UB Advocates pool who were unable to participate in focus groups were given the opportunity to participate via a web survey (32). In all, 49 students provided feedback. Nearly two-thirds of the participants (32) are female, and over half (29) have been involved as UB Advocates for at least one year. Over three-quarters (38) of the participants are undergraduates, with 5 freshmen, 7 sophomores, 10 juniors, and 16 seniors. Of the 36 domestic students, 25 identify as white, 2 as African American, 8 as Asian, and 4 as other or unknown. The international students come from Canada (1), China (2), Ghana (1), India (3), Italy (1), Korea (2), Malaysia (1), Nigeria (1), and Rwanda (1). The schools/colleges represented are Architecture and Planning (2), Arts and Sciences (19), Engineering (7), Education (1), Management (7), Medicine and Biomedical Sciences (2), Nursing (5), Pharmacy (1), Public Health (4), and Social Work (1). On average, the undergraduate participants began the semester with a QPA of 3.23, and the graduate/professional participants began with a 3.45.

When focus group participants arrived, they were asked to respond to a short paper questionnaire in which they were asked about the twelve Enriching Education Experiences included on the NSSE. For each, they were to indicate their awareness of opportunities to participate at UB, whether they have participated or not, and the degree of importance this experience has for their personal educational goals. Importance ratings were tabulated by focus group facilitators, and this tabulation was shared with the group. Facilitators then asked students about their motivations for engaging in co-curricular and community service/volunteer activities, barriers preventing participation, and suggestions for increasing participation in these types of activities at UB. The web survey contained all items from the paper questionnaire along with open-ended items parallel to the questions addressed in the focus group discussions.

## Results

### *Awareness of, Participation in, and Importance of Co-Curriculars and Community Service*

Table 1 presents the quantitative results for the paper questionnaire. All students are aware of opportunities to participate in co-curricular activities and nearly all (95.9%) are aware of community service and volunteer opportunities. A large proportion of respondents engage in co-curricular activities (83.7%), while a much smaller proportion engages in community service and volunteering (63.3%). These UB Advocates are very active as compared to the overall student population, and as a result, they can provide good information about motivations and barriers related to participation.

In terms of importance of the enriching experiences to personal educational goals, roughly half of the respondents (51.0%) view co-curricular activities as very important, while only 32.7% view community service and volunteering as important. Many students are told by experienced adults (e.g., teachers, parents, guidance counselors) that it is important to get involved in out-of-classroom activities as these activities look “good on a résumé.” Perhaps these messages emphasize student organizations rather than community service or volunteering.

*Table 1: Importance of Enriching Experiences*

<i>Enriching Experience</i>	<i>UB Offers Opportunities</i>	<i>Participated</i>	<i>Very Important to Educational Goals</i>
Participate in co-curricular activities (organizations, campus publications, student government, social fraternity or sorority, etc.)	100.0	83.7	51.0
Practicum, internship, field experience, co-op experience, or clinical assignment	87.8	51.0	55.1
Community service or volunteer work	95.9	63.3	32.7
Foreign language coursework	93.9	38.8	42.9
Study abroad	100.0	10.2	36.7
Independent study or self-designed major	87.2	22.4	40.8
Culminating senior experience (capstone course, senior project or thesis, comprehensive exam, etc.)	83.7	22.4	40.8
Serious conversations with students of different religious beliefs, political opinions, or personal values	75.5	61.2	44.9
Serious conversations with students of a different race or ethnicity than your own	75.5	69.4	40.8
Using electronic medium (e.g., listserv, chat group, Internet, instant messaging, etc.) to discuss or complete an assignment	89.8	83.7	36.7
Campus environment encouraging contact among students from different economic, social, and racial or ethnic backgrounds	81.6	71.4	44.9
Participate in a learning community or some other formal program where groups of students take two or more classes together	81.6	40.8	36.7

### *Co-Curricular Activities: Participation and Perceptions*

Students in the focus groups defined co-curricular activities as anything outside of regular course work that students do for fun, connectedness, and social interaction. In terms of the number of student clubs, organizations, and activities in which student participate, the range is from one (UB Advocates) to as many as ten. In addition, students view co-curricular involvement as both memberships in discreet, organized groups, such as UB Advocates and other clubs, and as regular attendance at campus events, such as the Distinguished Speaker Series, Student Association sponsored games and activities, and “fairs” frequently hosted in the Student Union.

Responses among focus group participants varied widely regarding the amount of free time available for participation. Some do not have clearly defined hours of free time since activities in educational programs are very time consuming and vary from week to week. In addition, students lament that they may have what seems like a considerable amount of free time (10-15 hours), but it is so fragmented due to academic and work responsibilities, that it is hard to devote time to co-curricular activities. They also must fit in everything else, other than school or work (e.g., shopping, cleaning, entertainment activities), during this time. In addition, this amount of free time can decrease according to the week’s priorities (e.g., midterms or papers due). Just over half (55.6%) of web survey respondents report that they have 5 or fewer hours per week to devote to co-curricular activities. An additional 29.6% indicate that they have 10 or fewer hours per week. It is likely that their lack of time is the reason they chose to complete the 30-minute web survey rather than attend the 90-minute focus group.

We asked students what motivates them and other students to become involved in co-curricular activities. The motivations that they identified are shown in Table 2. The most common motivation relates to the social aspects of participation: students want to form networks, meet people, and make friends, and they view participation in co-curricular activities as an avenue to help them begin relationships. Coming in second are résumé building and the commitment to change or to have a personal impact on the world around them. Students know it is important to be active in college so as to be more competitive when they are on the job market or applying to graduate schools. However, students also have more personally meaningful reasons for engaging in co-curricular activities, such as developing leadership and other skills that can help them later on in their careers and their need to feel like they are a part of the bigger community while they are attending UB. It is encouraging to note that only four students mention extrinsic rewards, such as money, free food, and prizes, as a primary motivation for engaging in co-curricular activities.

Our respondents indicate that students who do not get involved in co-curricular activities are most likely spending their time studying or doing homework (mentioned by 18 students), working (13), “hanging out” with friends (12), partying (9), or following personal interests away from campus (7). In addition, many students are trying to “de-stress” and escape from their responsibilities for a while by engaging in physical activities and exercise; reading, listening to music, watching television and/or movies, playing video games, or surfing the web; sleeping; and shopping. Only six students believe that those who are not involved in co-curricular activities are wasting their time by “doing nothing.”

*Table 2: Motivations to Participate in Co-Curricular Activities*

<i>Motivation</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Exemplar Statements</i>
Career Development	5	“has improved my professional skills” “help in career”
Commitment to Change/Personal Impact	7	“I feel I can help make a difference” “personal commitment to change”
Develop Community	6	“the need to be part of a community” “makes UB smaller, like a community”
Encourage Time Management	1	“keeps me on schedule and use my time better”
Extrinsic Rewards	4	“free stuff” “free sandwiches to gift give-aways”
Fun	5	“they’re fun” “I enjoy it.”
Learning/Classwork	3	“exciting to learn something new” “opportunity to learn outside of the classroom”
Need for Something other than Academics	6	“change from your routine work” “get away from class”
Networking/Meeting People	11	“networking” “to make friends, meet people”
Personal Interests	2	“involves something that interests me deeply”
Résumé Building	7	“looks good on résumé” “makes résumé look better”
Stress Reduction	1	“it’s an outlet to reduce stress”

When asked how students might be better informed about opportunities to participate in co-curricular activities at UB, there seemed to be a general consensus that many of the commonly-used forms of advertising (e.g., e-mails, posting on MyUB, banners and fliers, etc.) simply do not work. One student suggests: “They already know about them (opportunities for participation). The real need is motivating students to partake in them.”

To that end, students felt that activities and events should be advertised through as many available avenues as possible, including e-mail, MyUB, UBTv, posters, banners, and fliers around campus, on the UB events calendar, via listservs, and in campus publications. However, the advertising should be designed to appeal to student interests and should include some mention of the benefits students receive through their participation. Even further, students complain that they are so bombarded with information about activities and events that they have become desensitized. Thus, there is the need for more targeted advertising to appeal directly to students who have personal interests within the area addressed by the activity or event. To achieve this, the university might more aggressively survey all incoming students every semester

regarding personal interests and work to match campus groups with interested students. In this manner, the number of direct e-mails would be reduced, and students would receive only those of interest to them. In addition, other forms of advertising could contain key words related to an interest area so that banners, posters, fliers, and information on MyUB would be more readily noticed by students with those particular interests.

### *Community Service and Volunteering*

Nearly all of the students (45) indicate that it is important to be active in the Western New York community while they are students at UB. They recognize that Buffalo is their temporary home, and they need to contribute to its care. In addition, they indicate that being active in serving the local community helps them to develop relationships in the local community and feel more a part of it. Finally, being active in the community encourages learning outside of the community and allows them to get the best experience they can get at UB.

Although fewer respondents believe that participation in community service and volunteer work can enhance leadership skills, just over 75.0% see its value for their own leadership and communications skills. Not only do students feel that they learn how to inspire and motivate others, but they can model the leadership skills of people they meet in the community. In addition, they learn better communication and interpersonal skills as they interact with people from all backgrounds and all walks of life. Finally, working hard to help those less fortunate in the community helps “build character” and enhances such positive qualities as “tolerance, patience, generosity, and selflessness.”

The remaining 11 respondents, however, feel that personal learning and skill development are enhanced only when they have a specific leadership role. As shown in Table 3, only one person mentions the development of leadership skills as a motivation to participate in community service and volunteer opportunities. The most common reason students offer for doing community service and volunteer work is that these activities provide them with the opportunity to do good things for the community and for others. Another important reason relates to personal and academic interests. Students in certain academic majors are motivated to volunteer for activities that provide practical experience. Students who are passionate about world issues (e.g., environmental issues) are also often motivated to volunteer.

*Table 3: Motivations to Participate in Community Service or Volunteer Activities*

<i>Motivation</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Motivation</i>	<i>Frequency</i>
Chance to help others and do good things	11	Learning/Opportunity to Experience New Things	4
Encourages positive feelings and pride	5	Leadership Skills	1
Enhances sense of community	3	Meeting People/Making Friends	3
Extrinsic Rewards	2	Personal/Academic Interests	8
Fun	3	Résumé Building	1
Group Fundraiser	1		

In terms of informing students about community service and volunteer opportunities at UB, respondents offered the same advertising and marketing suggestions as for co-curricular activities. One student suggests, however, that community service is often thought of as a punishment on campus since those students who go through the university adjudication process are often “sentenced” to a certain number of hours of community service. Perhaps the focus needs to be changed to emphasize that regardless of what factors encouraged these particular students to do community service, they are still having a positive impact on the campus community and others can have that same impact simply by getting involved and volunteering.

In terms of the structure of community service and volunteer opportunities, over half of our respondents (29) prefer single-day events. Students feel that it is easier to fit a single-day commitment into a busy schedule, and they can get a variety of experiences by doing several single-day projects. Fifteen respondents support on-going projects, suggesting that these projects help them build relationships with people they meet while completing the project. Only 8 students prefer alternative break programs, in which students use their Spring Break to volunteer for a particular project. These students suggest that break programs are the most fun and still do not require a long-term commitment that extends over the course of a semester or an academic year. When marketing different types of opportunities, project coordinators might mention the distinct benefits offered by the time structure of the opportunity.

### Conclusions

The students who participated in this research offer some valuable insight into participation in co-curricular and community service and volunteer activities at UB. They suggest that many students have positive motivations for engaging in each and that those who do not participate are likely to busy studying, working for pay, or performing other activities to help them de-stress. The most effective way of marketing such opportunities to students may be targeted messages in a variety of formats that speak to personal interests, as well as to the benefits that students can expect to gain by participating.

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<sup>1</sup> UB Advocates are student volunteers who meet each semester to discuss campus issues with trained facilitators. Since students self-nominate into the UB Advocates program and those who attend a particular session do so based on the scheduling of the session, as well as their interest in a particular topic, they may not be representative of the entire population of UB students.