Bridging Academia and Industry: The Influence of Student Club Engagement on Workplace Diversity, Inclusion, and Skill Development

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Demonstrating a commitment to diversity, equity, inclusion, and a sense of belonging remains an organizational strategy to address inequalities in the workplace. Academic institutions play a role in aiding organizations to build a capable workforce that can navigate and contribute within diverse settings. Several microcosms exist within the academic world that have implications for the workplace, among these include student engagement and leadership in extracurricular activities, such as student clubs. However, there is a gap in the literature regarding the influence of student-club leader diversity on club demographic composition that needs to be explored. This narrative review serves as a call to action for future research to investigate these considerations and the potential influences and benefits to the workplace. Furthermore, this narrative highlights the documented benefits of student club participation in the workplace, including improved employee skill development, increased ability to collaborate and think critically, and enhanced workplace retention.

Keywords: diversity, equity, inclusion, student clubs, club president, belonging, extracurricular activities, workplace readiness, leadership

INTRODUCTION

There continues to be significant discussion surrounding diversity, equity, and inclusion, with the most recent iteration adding belonging (DEIB) as an organizational strategy to address historic and systemic racism in the United States. Despite DEIB's evolving rhetoric and implementation challenges, diversity in the workforce is an undeniable reality. Organizations must be prepared to support a diverse workforce, and employees must be prepared to collaborate and engage with diverse individuals, whether that involves differences in ethnicity and race, lived experiences, age, or other factors. Institutions of higher education have a pivotal role in preparing graduates to navigate and contribute effectively within these complex work environments. By engaging with academic institutions, organizations can tap into a talent pipeline of individuals more prepared to contribute meaningfully by leveraging individual differences for organizational benefit.

For colleges and universities to deliver on their promise of profession-ready graduates, they must continuously adapt their curriculum to align with industry trends and emerging needs, utilizing various high-impact, pedagogical strategies. These strategies include hands-on, experiential, and active learning

that facilitate collaborative opportunities in which students engage with each other as well as internal and external stakeholders. This helps them develop greater self-awareness, cultural sensitivity, apply theoretical concepts to real-world challenges, creatively think and problem-solve, and improve critical soft skills beyond the classroom. Student engagement in extracurricular activities, such as student clubs, provides additional opportunities for students to not only develop and refine these skills, but learn how to work in diverse group settings and positively contribute to team goals. Clubs also provide students with the opportunity to hold various roles and learn how to contribute effectively within different capacities, developing an aptitude for leadership.

Although there are various types of student clubs within the context of higher education, clubs expose students to more opportunities to engage with diverse populations. Criscione-Naylor and Debrov (2023) found student clubs foster organic diversity based on like interests and universal appeal. Therefore, clubs can provide students with more realistic experiences of what they are likely to encounter in the workplace, as well as help students develop an understanding and appreciation for diversity. This is of interest to businesses, as there are several connections between diversity in the workplace and the ability to achieve a stronger bottom line, as well as superior team performance (Moon & Christensen, 2020; Tamunomiebi & Eke, 2020). Additionally, student engagement in clubs helps students develop higher proficiency in several workplace skills including but not limited to verbal communication, teamwork abilities, self-motivation, problem-solving, and being proactive (McGunagle & Zizka, 2020). Although there are a variety of studies that focus on student clubs, highlighting the advantages of student participation, there is a lack of attention directed toward the influence of student club leaders on the demographic composition of club members and, similarly, the potential influence that may transcend into the workplace. This narrative review manuscript is the first step in identifying parallels between student club leaders' influence on demographic composition and the corresponding benefits to the club, as well as implications for businesses.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There is a significant gap in the academic literature surrounding student extracurricular club engagement, particularly regarding the diversity of student club leaders and their influence on the demographic composition of club members and the corresponding benefits to the club. Yet, research has begun to provide a foundation for drawing parallels that suggest the importance of further exploring how leadership influences demographic composition and how this may uniquely benefit the workplace in promoting a healthy diversity climate and helping organizations achieve DEIB goals. Additionally, it underscores the value of diversity within student clubs not only for their members, but also for the broader implications it has for future employers.

Diversity Climate

Moon and Christensen (2020) found that an organization's diversity climate defined as the openness and commitment of the organization to accept diversity and promote inclusion, boosts organizational performance. Specifically, they found racial diversity as compared to gender, job, and longevity (in the job) diversity, contributes to improved performance as the workforce brings in a variety of perspectives and ideas to the workplace. Similarly, Tamunomiebi and Eke (2020) found evidence in their research that an organization's commitment to diversity promotes employees to combine different skills, knowledge, and experiences for better problem-solving and decision-making. As a result, a diverse workforce fosters an environment that leverages teamwork and collaboration resulting in higher productivity and increased profits for businesses. Accordingly, when an organization's positive diversity climate is managed, it mitigates interpersonal conflicts and fosters more openness to different perspectives and willingness to engage in constructive debates. Furthermore, a diverse leader of a team or function can function as a symbolic representation of the organization's commitment to diversity, breaking down invisible barriers in the workplace.

However, the management of diversity extends beyond the implementation of legal compliance activities such as equal opportunity law and extends to the organization's commitment and values to

consciously treat each individual in the organization fairly and focuses on leveraging differences that benefit the organization (Moon and Christensen, 2020; Tamunomiebi & Eke, 2020). This means that organizations must be purposeful and intentional in recognizing the value of diversity and how they leverage that diversity to benefit the organization. Organizations may also need to conduct regular pulse surveys, not only to gather insights on employee perceptions but also to serve as an open communication channel where employees feel heard and see meaningful action taken based on the data, contributing to a positive diversity climate.

Becker, Richards, and Stollings (2022) identified that age diversity is the most common workplace diversity factor, and multigenerational teams outperform single-generation teams, further supporting the value of diversity while highlighting the necessity of addressing communication gaps across the generations. As such, they reported capturing and transferring knowledge between age groups as a major concern, as Millennials and younger employees prefer digital communication (such as texts, emails, and instant messaging), while other generations prefer face-to-face interactions, which are crucial for sharing tacit knowledge. Student clubs foster a safe learning environment that allows for exploration, bridging this gap, as student clubs often have tenure diversity, which is defined by rank in college years (i.e., first year vs. senior), reflecting significant differences in workplace readiness as well as life stage. Becker et al. highlighted the need for organizations to bridge the generational communication gap by facilitating face-to-face interactions, mentorship, and structured knowledge-sharing strategies, as well as common pedagogical strategies in higher education and student club dynamics.

Extra-Curricular Engagement and Sense of Belonging

There is a plethora of student club organizations at the college and university level. Commonly, student clubs include, but are not limited to, Greek life; ethnic, cultural, religious, and political organizations; student athletic and intramural clubs; professional associations and chapters; music, theater, and arts groups; and general topics of interest. The level of diversity exposure varies across these clubs; however, Park (2014) found that while some organizations are racially homogenous, students of color still developed strong cross-racial friendships during their college years. Yet, for certain ethnically homogenous organizations, the scarcity of spaces where students of color can engage with same-race peers underscores the importance of supporting student organizations that promote retention and a sense of belonging. As such, the presence of diverse leadership in the student club and business unit, can enhance others' sense of belonging and serve as a powerful symbolic representation of a commitment to diversity.

Student engagement is defined as holistically connecting students' curricular and co-curricular activities to student learning, providing opportunities for connection within the collegiate environment that can translate to increased student persistence and readiness for life after college (Kuh, 2009). The literature highlights numerous benefits of student engagement in extracurricular activities including clubs and organizations. Participation helps students manage stress, create healthy habits, improve their university engagement and academic performance, build social capital and prevent feelings of isolation (Al-Musa, & Al-Qudah, 2021; Glass & Gesing, 2018; King, McQuarrie, & Brigham, 2021; Mitchell, et al., 2023; Thornhill, et al., 2023; Winstone et al., 2022). By joining clubs, students find spaces where they can socialize, build friendships, and experience a sense of community, all of which contributes to a more enjoyable and less stressful academic journey. This enhanced satisfaction and sense of belonging can increase overall motivation and mental well-being, preparing students for the demands of both academic and work environments. "Through their leadership and involvement, participants were not only finding a place where they felt they belonged, but they were seeking to create and maintain this space for others on campus, and in some cases they sought to extend this by supporting others in accessing college through sharing the cultural capital they had acquired regarding success in college (Luedke and Garcia, 2024, p.64)." As such, students also acquire skills specific to the workplace including leadership development, conflict resolution, and communication. Furthermore, Graupensperger, Panza, and Evans (2020) conducted a study investigating network centrality, group density, and strength of social identification in college club sport teams. Although club sports teams may have varying dynamics as compared to other clubs, they can still provide insights into social identification at the individual and group levels. In their study, they measured how connected individual members are within the group, as well as individual relationships within the

group, identifying that teams that spend more time together develop a stronger sense of belonging, reinforcing the importance of group-wide social connections. As a result, there is a stronger emotional connection and attachment among group members, as well as additional benefits such as improved mental health and wellbeing, and greater psychosocial development, which refers to an individual's enhanced ability to navigate personal, social, and emotional aspects of life.

Motivation to participate in extracurricular activities has been linked to factors including professional development. Haines (2019) found that students joined 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 (Haines, 2019, p.110)." Denman (2019) found that engagement in student activities expanded "students' social networks, contributing to social life and friends, providing opportunities for students to help and serve others and make a positive impact, and contributing to positive mental health, p.111)." Further, diverse leadership roles within these activities can play a critical role in developing workplace skills. According to Jenkins (2007), "student leaders from more diverse student organizations reported a strong impact on the development of their leadership skills, more positive self-ratings of their own leadership skills when compared to other campus leaders, and higher perceived preparation for their careers after graduation."(p.78).

An additional benefit to extracurricular engagement is its tie to a student's sense of belonging at the institution. A sense of belonging refers to an individual's feeling of being accepted and valued at an institution and has been linked to student retention and workplace retention. Student organizations can serve as a place of support and a "feeling of home" giving students a place to practice skill development in a relatively safe space (Haines, 2019). Sasso et al. (2023) found that multiracial students often struggled to find a sense of belonging at their institutions, and that student organizations became very important to their leadership and identity development, as they were more welcomed in organizations with above-average diversity. However, belonging is not automatically derived from diversity. Increasing racial representation in organizations does not necessarily result in a stronger sense of belonging for diverse members unless inclusive participation structures, such as leadership roles and decision-making authority, are included in the organization (Sasso et al., 2023; Strayhorn, 2012). Further, Vaccaro and Newman (2016) explored differences in belonging between privileged and minoritized students and found that attendance and participation in clubs does not automatically bring a sense of belonging to minoritized students. For them, belonging is connected to being involved in organizations where they can be their authentic selves.

For first generation students, any kind of student involvement can lead to increased sense of belonging and institutions "For first-generation college students of color, their sense of belonging is correlated with their involvement in extracurricular activities, exposure to diversity on campus, and their difficulty with academics (Thornhill et al., 2023, p.20)." Inclusive leadership in the workplace can also lead to a greater sense of belonging. When individuals see people like themselves in leadership positions, they see a clearer pathway to advancement in the workplace and can find mentors who have a better understanding of their unique needs (Miller et al., 2024). While Vaccaro and Newman's model (2016) of belonging clearly shows the benefits to both privileged and minoritized students, socioeconomic factors pose constraints for students who cannot afford to participate in the high-impact practices that lead to increased engagement and belonging. In a study by Nguyen and Herron (2020), low-income students found a sense of belonging among other low-income students but often felt excluded from spaces designed to foster engagement and connection. Things like supplemental course materials, fees to join clubs, and optional trips were out of reach for these students, and they often had to choose to work rather than participate in volunteer activities or unpaid internships. Although a variety of opportunities must be in place to encourage belonging and engagement for all students, the advantages to engaged students and their future employers are clear. As stated in Gallup (2015), if graduates were "extremely active in extracurricular activities and organizations while attending college their odds of being engaged at work nearly doubled." (p.10).

Skills Development and Workplace Readiness

According to Rosenberg, et.al. (2012), "students enter college with the expectation that they will acquire the knowledge, the skills, and the abilities to enter the workforce. Graduates expect to have acquired the skills necessary to perform their jobs effectively 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" (p.7). Participating in student organizations offers a valuable opportunity for students to develop essential skills. The five highest ranked workforce skills according to McGunagle and Zizka, (2020) include being, "a team player, self-motivation, verbal communication, problem-solving, and being proactive" (p.12). Participation in student clubs has a direct correlation with transitioning from a group of individuals to building teams in the workplace that share a common goal. Firstly, student clubs are simply a collection of individuals, but they can provide a structured and safe team learning environment in which students are exposed to a variety of different team considerations and must develop essential skills that enable the group to work cohesively in achieving its objectives. In a study Petre (2000) found several important dimensions that contribute to students' ability to effectively participate in the team and contributed to their skills development including student to student relationships, student to student support, giving responsibilities, taking on different roles, and student-teacher (student-advisor) relationships.

Student to student relationships were described as students reciprocally learning from one another. This learning takes the form of recognizing individual differences in attitudes, beliefs and behaviors, and students develop the ability to assimilate, or influence based on contextual details. This enhances students' ability to communicate effectively and emphasizes cooperation over competition. Secondly, students support one another through peer-to-peer interactions, openly sharing their learnings to promote group growth and encourage active participation and reciprocal dialogue. This has direct connections to developing communication and problem-solving skills within the team as well as empathy. Through teamwork students develop a feeling of academic accomplishment and involvement. Furthermore, having different roles within the group helps students mold their actions. This was cited as intentionally developing leadership skills as well as, "awakening attention, improving communication, developing critical thinking, developing decision-making skills, and assuring long-term retention, and applying knowledge and skills" (Petre, 2020, p.153).

It is likely that variations exist across student clubs in the learning experiences created and influenced by the level of engagement of the club advisor and the club's objectives. However, for those clubs that are more structured, with formal projects, learning instruction, team formation, and a focus on developing knowledge, there are several benefits. Whisner et al. (2022) found that students value interdisciplinary team experiences and that these experiences impacted how they interacted with others, as well as the importance they attributed to their role within the team. This again emphasizes cooperation and contribution to achieving the shared goals verses competition. Chen (2021) emphasizes that to maintain students' competitiveness in the workforce, they must develop "written and oral interpersonal communication skills in various social contexts like team building, problem solving, and conflict resolution" (p.1). More structured club activities such as integrating in project-based collaboration, critical thinking, and enhanced communication (Chen). This is further exacerbated when students recognize how all roles within a team contribute. Ali (2019) highlights that students learn through complex and open-ended problems, and their ability to do so is influenced by the instructor's role. For example, the advisor is, "responsible to design and identify problems that should be complex and vague to encourage students to inquire about it" (p.75). Similarly, Petre (2000) found that when students recognized the impact of their performance on the overall group performance, they developed a heightened awareness and commitment to personal responsibility. Understanding how belonging in university organizations influences workplace outcomes can help employers design diversity-driven engagement initiatives.

Leadership Development

Kim (2022) examined the impact of participation in extracurricular activities on students' leadership development at the individual, group, and community levels, using the Social Change Model and the

Socially Responsible Leadership Scale (SRLS-R2) with data from 706 college students. Kim found students who were involved in extracurricular activities in both high school and college had higher leadership development scores across all levels. Furthermore, students involved in co-curricular organizations rated themselves higher in relational leadership skills, including but not limited to strong interpersonal skills, serving as a role model, self-regulation, conflict resolution, and teamwork. As such, Kim found that serving as an officer or holding leadership positions in student organizations provided more opportunities for leadership training and the combination of frequency and quality of student involvement correlates with stronger leadership and interpersonal skills. Lastly, students who actively engage in extracurricular organizations or clubs in college develop stronger group and community leadership values compared to those who do not participate, demonstrating that these skill advancements are immediately applicable and add value to the workplace.

Beltran (2019) examined the leadership orientation of student club presidents using data collected from 653 respondents, including 93 student club presidents, 95 club advisors, and 465 student club officers. Although diversity was not a mediating factor in the study, it was identified that student leaders showed, "high importance on people in their leadership orientation and very high relationship with people in their leadership skill…thus, they put primacy on human relations expressed in collaborating and empowering people rather than being rational and goal oriented," (p.59). This orientation has direct implications for these leaders in developing a greater sense of belonging among their members, as well as openly valuing individuals' unique differences and contributions. Furthermore, Beltran noted that the presidents of these clubs were known to believe in a strong chain of command, transparency, and setting goals for the organization. These preferences can support the management of diversity in the workplace, where leaders can help prioritize and create greater transparency to improve the organization's climate of inclusion.

Lastly, Dadario and Sanner (2022) found that students who held leadership roles within student club organizations were perceived to have greater soft skills as compared to two general members. Additionally, it was found that these students had a greater potential for job interview success due to their higher proficiency in self-regulation as evidenced by their speaking abilities. Kuzu (2021) highlighted that student engagement in extracurricular activities and clubs fosters social-cognitive skills and identity development, both of which contribute to students' academic success and future careers. This may translate into these student leaders being more prepared to undertake leadership roles within the workplace and if these individuals are diverse, their presence also facilitates a symbolic representation of the organization's positive diversity climate.

DISCUSSION

There are numerous studies that validate the relationship between academic experiences and workplace outcomes. Accordingly, studies have provided evidence of the positive and tangible benefits of students' extracurricular engagement in student clubs, both as general members and, more so, in leadership capacities, whether formal or informal, and in elected roles (i.e., president) versus specific job roles related to tasks at hand. This engagement is directly linked to enhanced proficiency in a variety of skills and competencies including and not limited to creative thinking, problem solving, teamwork and collaboration, emotional self-regulation and well-being, retention and more (Chen, 2021; McGunagle & Zizka, 2020; Petre, 2020; Tamunomiebi & Eke, 2020). Although there is a lack of research that specifically identifies the influence of club leader diversity on the demographic profile of the club, existing research suggests a positive relationship between the leader's diversity and the overall diversity of the club, as well as enhanced feelings of belonging. As such, it is essential that the benefits and corresponding implications of student engagement and a sense of belonging to the workplace are made more apparent to stakeholders. Table 1 summarizes the narrative review factors, key findings, and implications for the workplace based on existing research.

TABLE 1
CLUB ENGAGEMENT FACTORS, FINDINGS, AND IMPLICATIONS FOR
THE WORKPLACE

Factor	Key Finding	Implication for the Workplace
Student Club Participation	Enhances teamwork, communication, and problem-solving skills	Prepares students with in-demand soft skills needed for collaboration
Leadership Roles	Develops interpersonal skills, self-regulation, identity awareness and additional soft skills	Increased job readiness, stronger leadership capacity, and retention
Leader Diversity	Lack of direct data but suggests leader diversity signals inclusion and promotes sense of belonging	Enhances diversity climate and may attract or help retain a more diverse work group
Sense of Belonging	Promotes authentic participation and inclusive collaboration	Fosters workplace engagement, mental health wellness, and team cohesion
Skill Development through Clubs	Provides pathways for students to develop critical skills and reciprocal learning	Prepares students to work collaboratively and effectively to contribute and achieve shared goals

The benefits of student engagement in student clubs have direct implications for organizations, encouraging them to focus on institutional policies and opportunities for leadership rotations and development programs that promote a more inclusive environment, thereby creating a more positive diversity climate. Furthermore, rotational leadership opportunities, such as leadership roles for a specified amount of time related to special projects, can not only help accelerate leadership development but also demonstrate an organizational climate that values multiple kinds of diversity, including gender, generational, work-task, tenure, and racial. As such, academic institutions and the workplace can enhance overall diversity and skills development through more structured and intentional program integration, such as mentorships, rotations, and cross-team or unit collaboration. Overall, organizations will benefit from working with academic partners to identify and target student club leaders and members for their talent recruitment efforts.

Future Directions for Research and Practice

There are significant gaps in the literature to support a plausible relationship between leader diversity and diversity demographic composition of members or a workplace group. Longitudinal studies examining the long-term impact of leadership diversity on club participation and its connection to both student persistence and workplace readiness and retention will provide important insights into determining how best to support extracurricular high-impact practices at the collegiate level, which can be effectively mirrored in the workplace. Additionally, successful workplace onboarding practices can be tested in student clubs and organizations to foster connections, leadership development, and a sense of belonging. Furthermore, exploring the intersectionality of leadership identity (including race, gender, and socioeconomic status) and student organizational outcomes can help students prepare for an increasingly diverse workforce.

CONCLUSION

Despite the debate on how to most effectively achieve diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB) in the workplace, preparing the workforce to engage with diverse individuals is essential. By partnering with academic institutions, organizations can tap into a talent pipeline of individuals who are more prepared to contribute and collaborate in a diverse work environment. This narrative review highlights the documented benefits of student engagement in clubs, particularly in leadership roles, as a powerful tool for developing essential workplace skills, such as communication, teamwork, and problem-solving. While student clubs are recognized for various benefits that directly correlate to the workplace, the influence of a student club leader's diversity on the demographic composition of the student club needs to be explored. Developing research streams in this area will help inform practices in both higher education and businesses aimed at cultivating inclusive environments. Until this research is made available, organizations are encouraged to partner with academic institutions to have direct access to a more developed and skilled talent pipeline, especially seeking out those students that are not only highly engaged in extracurricular activities, but those engaged in a formal student club as a general member and especially leader member. Research has demonstrated that students who participate in clubs have more developed skills necessary to navigate and contribute positively to the workplace, as well as additional workplace skills that have better prepared these students for their transition into the workplace.

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