Encouraging Student Participation in Co-Curricular Activities

Background
One of the goals of CITE is to increase student involvement in co-curricular activities. Understanding why students are engaged in these activities is an essential step to increasing student participation. As such, in the spring of 2020, the CITE Office set out to complete a research project on co-curricular student engagement. The purpose of this study was to develop an understanding of the factors that impact students' participation in high impact practices in order to develop a framework for increasing student participation in these practices. The two research questions were as follows:
1. What are students' attitudes toward high impact practices (specifically undergraduate research, learning away/abroad, internships, and service learning) and what is their understanding of these practices?
2. How do students' attitude toward and understanding of high impact practices impact their participation in them?

Three interviews with highly involved students who are Bonner Leaders yielded several themes about student involvement. The participants were one Hispanic female who was a sophomore, one white male who was a first-year student, and one White female who was a recent UH graduate.

Summary of Findings
Participation in co-curricular activities is personal.
- Students' interest in co-curricular activities starts with experiences, values, and identities that often pre-date their college attendance.
- Major and career interests can create a need to participate in co-curricular programs.
- The academic and personal links that students make create and sustain co-curricular involvement.
- The benefits of co-curricular involvement are related to community, personal growth, and personal interests.
- Additional factors that stimulate involvement in co-curricular programs are related to community and personal and professional growth and interests.

Participation in co-curricular activities is relational.
- Co-curricular involvement provides a community of support, access, and information.
- Relationships and interactions with faculty are an essential component of participating in co-curricular activities.
- Access to co-curricular activities comes through personal interactions.
- Role-modeling and seeing examples through others facilitates co-curricular involvement.

Co-curricular activities are a part of a category of activities that promote attachment to the university.
- The student perspective of defining characteristics of co-curricular activities and other high impact practices is that they promote community and school spirit/pride.
- Programs that are high impact (either officially in the literature or based on student ideas about the term) enhance the appeal and value of an education at UH.

Co-curricular activities are impactful.
- The impact of co-curricular activities is related to their structure.
  - Impactful co-curricular activities are well-structured
  - Well-structured co-curricular activities facilitate involvement.
- Co-curricular opportunities create more opportunities for engagement.

Co-curricular activities are not easily accessible.
- There are supports to help students overcome barriers to co-curricular involvement, but students benefit from these supports only if they are members of communities that offer them.
- As gatekeepers to co-curricular involvement, individuals provide and obscure access.
- Financial and academic constraints and students' perception of these constraints are a barrier to involvement.

Recommendations for Co-Curricular Project Leaders
While this study explored the perceptions of only three students who are similar in their academic pursuits and leadership motivation, it does provide helpful insights into the value of co-curricular participation. These insights provide actionable steps that can be taken to increase the co-curricular participation of all students.

1. Co-curricular activity should be encouraged in communities in which students are members. For students who are not members of communities that are active in promoting co-curricular activities, targeting their communities is a better way to diversify student engagement than to expect those students to join activities that are attached to communities in which they are not members.

2. To be most impactful, co-curricular activities must be well-structured. There are several ways that programs can be well-structured: a strong academic connection, built in time management supports, and connection to other activities. These activities should also culminate in an experience that students see as valuable and high quality.

3. Avenues to participation, like application processes, should be easy to find and self-navigate. Project leaders should intentionally evaluate their programs for barriers and withhold assumptions about the types of students who are not involved and their reasons for not being involved.

4. Program leaders should encourage activities in components of the undergraduate experience that are required, like classes, to decrease conflicts with participants' "real life" commitments and increase meaningful participation.