

Aspects of Information Consumption, Production, and Need in
University Student Organizations

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Modern University campuses provide a number of opportunities for students to socialize with like-minded peers and promote their interests on campus.¹ One of the most popular avenues is through student organizations, where groups of students sharing a common interest form a society to promote and share that interest. These organizations have a tremendous number of information needs from both consumption and production standpoints. They are primarily student-run organizations, with members electing a representative body to govern the organization under the mentoring of a faculty advisor. The high turnover of their members to graduation and other obligations presents unique challenges to such organizations in perpetuating their shared knowledge and expertise, and requires them to constantly communicate their existence and activities to the greater campus to recruit new members.

These student organizations have a strong desire to communicate with the external world as a single entity, removing the individuality of their responses. Muller and Gruen² studied the use of shared electronic mail aliases as a form of direct versus mediated collaboration. They argued that the special case of a shared email alias differs from the classic mailing list metaphor in that it is used as the medium of collaboration itself such that the collaboration occurs *within* the tool, rather than the tool facilitating external collaboration. In their words, the collaboration occurred “within” email and not “through” it. Their primary criterion for this distinction was the focus on a shared external group image: whether the purpose of the alias was to allow a group of users to communicate as a single entity under the auspices of their organization. Using a shared email alias, individual users can read all incoming messages to that alias and respond to those messages using that alias, without revealing their individuality. This contrasts

strongly with the traditional mailing list, in which the list exists solely as a device of convenience, allowing one centrally-managed address to take the place of many; emails sent to the list retain the individuality of the sender, and every member of the list receives their own unique copy of the message.

Adding from personal observation, for the purposes of evaluating student organizations in particular, I would expand this notion of a “shared mailbox” to include the practice of using a special identifying token in the message subject to identify the organization. For example, Muller and Gruen cite one student organization that *carefully sent emails “from” its organization’s mailbox, reasoning that corporate sponsors and recruiters would not recognize the name of individual students, but would recognize the familiar name of their organization.* In fact, this same reasoning lies behind many of the mailing lists used by student organizations on the University of Illinois campus, but those organizations lack the technical capability to provide a shared mailbox and instead rely on the use of such an identifying token to remove a layer of individuality from their responses.

Hence, one strong information need of student organizations is often the need to communicate as a single entity. Since a great deal of communication in the modern era takes the form of electronic mail, this need often manifests itself in the form of shared or “branded” information streams that allow multiple members of the organization to communicate in a way that abstracts them from their role as a representative of that organization and instead places their information into the realm of an official response from the organization, alienated from its originator.

Although the governing body of a student organization usually consists primarily of students from that organization, most have one or more faculty advisors to provide guidance and advice to that body. McCluskey-Titus³ cites a number of roles these advisors fulfill, including that of *mentor...trusted colleague... coach... confidant... sponsor... resource person... role model... communication link... planner... and teacher*. Each of these roles leverages the experience and expertise of the faculty member to bridge the experiential and knowledge gaps of the student governing board. The role of the faculty advisor actually changes over time, as the author cites the guidelines put forth by Banks and Combs⁴ that *groups in the formation stage need an adviser to initiate and promote ideas...groups that are growing and developing a purpose rely on an adviser to be a teacher or a helper...[and] maturing or well developed groups require an adviser to serve as facilitator or a friend*.

The information needs of a student organization therefore form a developmental continuum that closely tracks the evolution of the organization itself. Early-stage organizations need an *incubator* to spawn, encourage, and see new ideas to fruition. An organization at this stage does not have the experience or confidence to make the organizational leaps it needs to grow. Once the organization has taken root and begun to grow, it needs shaping. The purpose of an advisor at this point is to help the organization make the right choices and learn without the losses incurred by pure trial-and-error guesswork. Finally, when the organization has firmly established itself, it still has a strong need for information stability and a strong connection to the political spheres above it. The advisor in this role provides a source of stability across student officer

boards and provides an information channel to higher levels of the campus political structure.

Although many student organizations are largely coeducational, there are a number of organizations that exist to serve the needs of specific minority populations. Women in the sciences face a unique set of challenges at every stage in their career development and thus a great deal of resources and research in recent years have been devoted to mitigating these obstacles and encouraging more women to join the sciences. In particular, the work done at Carnegie Mellon in the formation of the Women@SCS Advisory Council stands testament to the successes these programs have had in recognizing the needs of student organizations that focus on women in the sciences and satisfying those needs with campus-level support. From an information-needs basis, however, such women organizations may largely be viewed in the same context as their primarily-male and coeducational counterparts. In their analysis of the success of the Mellon council, Frieze and Blum ⁵ identified several factors relating to information dissemination that they considered essential to the success of any student-run organization (gender-specific or coeducational): active participation by faculty, student leadership, regular meetings, a web site, mailing lists, and outreach.

Faculty participation was identified as a crucial source of advice and mentoring. This infusion of experience can be a critical determining factor in how an organization deals with an unexpected event or crisis. These advisors are often assigned to an organization for a period of time that spans multiple iterations of the organization's own student leadership boards, and hence provides a source of information stability and historical background to support new boards and allow them to call upon the expertise of

their predecessors. The use of student leadership boards beneath the faculty advisors allows the membership of the organization to be governed by its peers and encourages communication between members and their leadership through common bonds.

Regular meetings were cited as an important information channel for members to transfer information amongst themselves. These interactions provide *a safe, non-judgmental environment where members can ask for help, and give it in return*. By allowing the greater membership to communicate with their peers, this provides a secondary level of information transfer below that of the official channels of the leadership boards.

The creation of a Web site and the use of mailing lists emphasize the importance of electronic and online information sources in today's age. Frieze and Blum underline the importance of a Web site in publicizing an organization and increasing its visibility on campus in order to communicate events and news items to current membership and recruit new members by enticing them with information about its activities and goals. Without this online information stream, the organization is forced to rely on word-of-mouth or printed sources, both of which carry considerable distribution burdens. The use of mailing lists follows as a natural companion to the Web site and is used as a large-scale dissemination medium between all levels of the organization (officers/officers, officers/advisors, officers/members, members/members). Finally, outreach is used as an active information stream to interact with the external community and make it aware of the organization's goals.

Expanding upon some of the unique challenges that women in the sciences face, Fletcher et al ⁶ cited the finding that *a lack of information concerning the engineering*

curriculum and stereotypes that regard aptitude for math and science as masculine were significant barriers to women entering the sciences and significant causatives of the high attrition rates of those who do enter the field. In addition, obstacles such as *lack of self-confidence, ineffective learning environments, lack of female role models in science-related fields, and failure to recognize the relationship between science courses and societal expectations of women* were identified as contributing factors.

These barriers are largely information-driven, based in a firm grounding of misinformation and lack of information. Within the last several years *bridge programs* have been increasingly popular with their success at transitioning high school women into University-based engineering environments and preparing them for the obstacles they will face. By presenting them with targeted information designed to inform and educate, these programs fill a critical information need for these young women. However, once they reach the University setting, the information provided by the bridge programs can only go so far towards helping them adjust to their new environment, and female student organizations, such as the Society for Women Engineers, take over as their primary information source.

Female-based engineering student organizations such as SWE are designed around the goal of providing a resource to women engineers, and in particular, providing an environment in which they can communicate with other female engineers and be provided with relevant informational sources. Hence, while most student organizations link their members together with a common bond of shared interests, these organizations have the unique distinction of having their membership demographic be their common interest and the primary goal of the organization. In the case of SWE,⁷ the organization

counts among its primary goals to *inform young women, their parents, counselors, and the general public, of the qualifications and achievements of women engineers and the opportunities open to them, and to serve as a center of information on women in engineering.*

SWE's underlying goal is therefore to serve as an information clearinghouse on women in science and engineering. It does this both through communication from its national board to individual student sections around the country and through the localized information network each section forms. Although SWE student sections do communicate with their national board, they act primarily as independent entities and their primary source of information is local resources. Internal communication, both at the officer and member levels, is a crucial aspect of their operation. A great deal of a SWE student sections' activities revolve around ways in which women engineers can network with each other and share concerns, success stories, and experiences about classes, jobs, and the like. In short, a minority-serving student organization like the Society of Women Engineers occupies a primary role in information sharing among its members. One of the largest ways in which it facilitates this information sharing is by hosting networking events in which members are brought together in a social atmosphere.

The role of social networker and inwards-looking information provider is not unique to gender-based student groups. Many minority-serving organizations share this need to provide an island of common interests and information sharing within the context of an indifferent or discriminatory environment. Cultural organizations such as those serving Asian American students⁸ extend this need to include the preservation and communication of cultural backgrounds as well. Gender-based and coeducational

organizations tend to include a wide variety of ethnicities and cultural backgrounds, where there is little shared heritage. Cultural organizations, on the other hand, are centered on the celebration of a particular cultural background, and one of the roles of the organization is to enhance awareness of that culture and improve students' impressions of it.

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