

THE EFFECT OF EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES ON CAREER OUTCOMES: A LITERATURE REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

Although much attention has already been devoted to the benefits of extracurricular activities (ECAs) in general – both from a developmental and from a social perspective – little time has been devoted to a complete academic study of the effects of university ECAs in particular. This review draws on insights from psychology, social psychology, economics and sociology in an attempt to develop a holistic perspective on the effects of college ECAs on labour market outcomes and career success. The various shortcomings of this research area are highlighted with additional considerations for future research.

INTRODUCTION

Although initially regarded as a distraction, extracurricular activities (ECAs) are now recognised as an essential part of the college experience (Conway, 2009). These ECAs provide highly structured leisure environments (Huang & Carlton, 2003) which can confer a range of benefits on participants. Some are social: Schuh and Laverty (1983) argue that it creates better citizens, while Mahoney and Stattin (2000) find that it reduces rates of delinquency; some are personal and psychological: Geraghty (2010, p. 14) notes that it “enhances the student experience, aids academic performance, helps students to develop certain skills...improves their self-confidence” and also contributes to “student engagement, peer interaction, leadership, faculty interaction and student retention.” While these findings are important, this paper is interested only in the way that career success can result from participation in college ECAs. As such this

paper examines only those effects produced by participation which contribute to career success.

Research into the effects of participation in ECAs has been inconclusive so far. Initially, researchers shared Coleman's (1961) negative view of participation in ECAs. According to his zero-sum model of time allocation, students were faced with a situation in which they had a limited endowment of time to split between academic pursuits and structured and unstructured leisure activities. Coleman (1961) argued that the allocation of time to leisure activities resulted in poorer academic outcomes. Although this kind of thinking was heavily influential, today researchers tend to take the view that there are a host of benefits which derive from participation in ECAs, making ECA participation an investment rather than a distraction (Swanson, 2002).

Despite this more positive view, most studies stress that any benefits which stem from participation are heavily dependent on the nature of the activity (Eccles & Barber 1999; Barber, Eccles & Stone, 2001; Broh, 2002; Mahoney & Stattin, 2000)

REVIEW OF EXISTING LITERATURE ON OUTCOMES

What follows is an attempt to link the existing literature on the benefits of participation in extracurricular activities with that of career success. Combining theories from different disciplines makes it apparent that the link between ECAs and career success is mediated by a whole host of psycho-social factors. According to the existing literature, participation in ECAs can theoretically produce an effect on career outcomes through the following channels: 1) by fostering academic abilities 2) a training effect 3) by nurturing desirable personality traits 4) by providing individuals with social contacts. The evidence for this linkage will be explored in more detail.

EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES GENERATE GOOD ACADEMIC OUTCOMES

Gamp's (1990) study on academic achievement found that participation in student activities had a positive effect on grades – even when taking into account background variables. This position is strengthened by the fact that other researchers such as Huang & Carlton (2003) have found, and continue to find, such a relationship. Bartko and Eccles (2002) confirmed this result with their study of high school teenagers.

One explanation of this finding comes from researchers who have developed identification or commitment models which state that students are more likely to do well when they engage in school-sponsored ECAs because they foster commitment to the school's goals and identification with the school's culture. Effectively, there is a socialization effect which makes participants more likely to adopt pro-school values (McNeal, 1995). Certain papers argue that this is due to the type of people that students mix with while participating (Eccles & Barber, 1999; Mahoney & Stattin, 2000; Feldman & Matjasko, 2005). Gilman (2004) states that ECAs put students in touch with "supportive social networks" and allow them to interact with "competent non-parental adults" (p.32). Being in contact with non-deviant peers and with adults who are inclined to support school culture has a socializing effect (Mahoney & Stattin, 2000).

Marsh (1992) tests the participation-identification model outlined by Finn (1989) against the zero-sum model. Finn (1989) argues that a simple trade-off exists between extracurricular participation and positive academic outcomes. He found that total extracurricular participation does have the potential to increase students' commitment to school, although the effects were small. The study showed a positive effect on a series of psychological outcomes and other benefits such as "taking advanced courses, time spent on homework, the postsecondary aspirations, GPA...being on the academic track, college attendance."(p. 557) These results suggest that there is reason to believe that commitment to school leads to academic success.

In terms of the relationship between extracurricular activities and career success, it seems reasonable to assert that the contribution higher grades make to career outcome is an intuitive one. However, we must remark with Chickering (1994) that grades alone - specifically college grades - are poor predictors of success. He notes that "successful careers call for well-developed cognitive skills, interpersonal competence, and motivation" (p.51). Academic performance by itself does not speak to these qualities and therefore the non-academic effects of ECA participation must be considered.

EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES IMPROVE PARTICIPANTS' SKILL SET

Many studies reveal that one of the main goals of extracurricular activities is skill acquisition (Zaff, Moore, Papillo & Williams, 2003; Mahoney &

Stattin, 2000; Gilman, 2004; Eccles & Barber, 1999). Candidates as well as recruiters believe that participation in ECAs is indicative of the quality of their skill set (Conway, 2009). What is interesting to note here is that even if the training aspect of participation in ECAs did not exist, this type of biodata would continue to be used in the selection process so long as both sides believed in its ability to signal superior skills. From this perspective, even if membership of clubs and societies did not lead to a better skill set, it would still be legitimate to use participation as a signal in the personnel selection game so long as participation was found to be due to underlying heterogeneity in individuals (i.e. individuals participate because they are skilled instead of being skilled because they participate). This issue is one which makes serious empirical investigation of ECA participation very difficult because of a ‘selection bias’ which makes it difficult to compare those who participate with those who do not, because participation is itself evidence of underlying heterogeneities in the active group.

In any event, there is some evidence to support the theory that engaging in ECAs enables participants to acquire skills which prepare them for the labour market. Howard (1986, p. 545) found that “participation in student government, the school paper, and debating teams were most likely to relate to meaningful performance criteria.”

Although different researchers have found different effects for various activities (Barron, Ewing & Waddell, 2000; Rubin, Bommer & Baldwin, 2002), the literature does broadly support the hypothesis that extracurricular experiences are relevant to career success because they teach and develop appropriate skills, with a caveat added by Howard (1986) which states that these experiences are relevant only insofar as they can be related to concrete skills.

EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES AID PSYCHOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT

Another channel through which ECA participation can result in career success is through its effect on a range of psychological outcomes. As Chickering (1994, p.51) states, successful careers also call for “well-developed cognitive abilities, interpersonal competence and motivation.” Although ECAs have been tied to general improvements in mental health and other psychological outcomes (Gilman, 2004; Feldman & Matjasko, 2005), three specific outcomes are of interest; positive effects on self-esteem (Feldman & Matjasko, 2005), emotional intelligence (Chia, 2005),

and interviewing self-efficacy (Tay, Ang & Dyne, 2006). All of these have been linked with favourable outcomes in the labour market.

Baumeister et al. (2003) suggest that self-esteem mediates the relationship between participation and success due to two benefits which result: 1) a stock of positive feelings, and 2) greater initiative. Firstly, possessing a stock of positive feelings makes individuals better able to cope with stress and to react to challenging situations. Although Baumeister et al. (2003) found that self-esteem had little or no direct effect on job performance, it affected persistence at tasks. The authors cite experiments in which confederates with high self-esteem made better use of situational cues in order to form adaptive strategies (i.e. problem solve), compared with those with low self-esteem. Interestingly, Ellis and Taylor (1983) found that those with low self-esteem tended to have lower search intensity and thus spent longer looking for a job, indicating that this ability can be put to good use in the job search process as well as in the workplace.

Secondly, initiative has been found to be important both in the job search process and afterwards on the job, making it a good predictor of success (Ellis & Taylor, 1983). Larson (2000) points out that there is a limited opportunity for adolescents to experience both initiative and motivation in their daily lives. By contrast, structured voluntary activities represent a context within which initiative can develop.

Those who possess high levels of initiative will tend to exercise it in order to achieve desired outcomes; this means that they have a proactive personality (Kraimer, Seibert & Crant, 2001). Studies have shown that proactive behaviour is directly related to career success, as well as indirectly related through improved job performance, tolerance for stress, leadership effectiveness, work team performance, and entrepreneurship (Kraimer, Seibert & Crant, 2001). In sum, high levels of self-esteem fostered by ECA participation can be linked to career progression through improved ability to cope with challenges and proactivity.

The way in which emotional intelligence (EI) - “the ability to monitor one’s own and other’s [sic] feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them and to use this information to guide one’s thinking and actions” (Chia, 2005, p. 76) – is related to work and interview success. Chia’s (2005) study, which examined job offers of multi-national accounting firms to college graduates, showed that consideration of the so-

called ‘soft-skills’ of candidates was present at every level of the recruiting process. Candidates were initially screened and selected for the first round of job interviews using the information contained in their cover letter and CV. The author found that at this stage, the level of ECA participation which a candidate possessed was held to denote his or her level of EI. If the candidate made it through this initial round of interviews, it became clear that what was important in subsequent rounds was not the level of participation in ECAs but the experience which candidates gained from them - here EI was held to be a proxy variable for the benefits of participation in ECAs. The number of final job offers thus depended not only directly on ECA participation through the number of initial job offers received, but also indirectly due to its development of EI which determined the number of subsequent job interviews received by candidates and thus the number of final job offers.

Finally, success in the job search is also determined by an individual’s interviewing self-efficacy (ISE), that is, a candidate’s personal judgement of his or her interviewing capabilities (Tay, Ang & Dyne, 2006). ISE is linked to personality and biographical characteristics (those who are more extraverted tend to have higher ISE) but can also be developed within the context of ECA participation. Tay, Ang and Dyne (2006) cite studies which have found that membership of certain clubs and societies in college predicts interview evaluations because the skills developed through this form of participation (social interactions, influence tactics, self-presentation and image management) all have direct relevance to those needed to be successful in an interview.

Although there is a considerable body of evidence which notes that the developmental context of ECAs fosters the good psychological functioning which enables participants to achieve a host of labour market-related outcomes (Gilman, 2004; Feldman & Matjasko, 2005; Chia, 2005; Tay, Ang & Dyne, 2006) some researchers argue that these benefits may have been over-estimated (Fredricks & Eccles, 2006). For example, for certain aspects of career success (e.g. financial success) no link has been found with ECAs (Fredricks & Eccles, 2006). Nevertheless, there is sufficient evidence to support the hypothesis that ECAs result in psychological outcomes which are linked to career success.

EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES GIVE ACCESS TO SOCIAL CAPITAL

The final way in which ECA participation can lead to better career outcomes is through the development of social ties. Network theory emphasises the importance of the type of people which one comes into contact with. Granovetter's (1973) seminal work on the strength of weak ties highlighted the value of the acquaintances which individuals formulate. He argues that while strong ties (family and close friends) are a very important part of an individual's social network, links to those who are outside of this network and with whom the individual has infrequent contact (weak ties) have advantages that strong ties do not. This type of tie can provide a crucial source of information outside of that held by the high-density network and can be mobilised by the individual. Access to information outside of the individual's tightly-knit social circle can be instrumental in finding a job (Granovetter, 1974, 1983). Granovetter (1974) found that personal contacts were found to be superior to formal methods of job location and that of these personal contacts, weak ties were the most successful means of finding a job.

In support of this theory, Langlois (1977) and Ericksen and Yancey (1980) found that college-educated people were more likely to depend on weak ties compared with those who were not college-educated. This suggests that the university is a site where individuals both develop and learn how to develop those contacts which will prove useful later on in life. Also, as well as facilitating job search, evidence has been found which suggests that the use of weak ties in the job search process is strongly associated with higher occupational achievement (Granovetter, 1983), suggesting that even after a job is found, weak ties may continue to be mobilised by individuals to achieve other career-related outcomes.

Granovetter's (1983) theory has been subject to criticisms by other authors; Montgomery (1992), for example, stresses the need to focus on the structure of the network as well as the type of tie which is mobilised in the job search process. Seibert, Kraimer and Liden (2001) reviewed the empirical evidence on weak tie theory and in conclusion recommend that actors invest in weak ties in general before selectively strengthening them in order to mobilise the career-related benefits that come with good ones.

ISSUES RAISED BY EXISTING RESEARCH

This paper has shown that ECA participation is linked to career success through four channels: firstly, positive academic outcomes with participation; secondly, participation in ECAs has a training effect which results in the accumulation of skills which can be put to good use during job search and in the workplace; thirdly, participation results in a host of desirable psychological outcomes, which make the individual better adapted to achieve success. Finally, participation in ECAs allows individuals to accumulate social capital which can be mobilised in order to achieve desired career outcomes.

Although the literature connecting extracurricular participation with career success is very rich, there are issues yet to be fully addressed. These must be confronted before further investigation into the topic proceeds.

Firstly, it is important to note that the majority of the data which have been used by the researchers in their investigations has been taken from sources in the United States making it difficult to generalise findings outside of the US. Secondly, the vast majority of the studies cited above have been testing the relationship between participation in high school as opposed to college ECAs. It is clear that the context in which students find themselves in college is not the same as that of high schools. Furthermore, college students are probably more likely to be more involved in ECAs than high school students due to the wider range of activities on offer. In other words those students who were never interested in participation during their second-level education may still be able to reap the benefits associated with membership of clubs and societies despite the late development of their interest.

Thirdly, there are various difficulties associated with taking career success as the outcome of interest. Measurement of this phenomenon is problematic with readily quantifiable outcomes such as salary and position in the firm's hierarchy having been employed traditionally. However, Jencks, Perman and Rainwater (1988) found that non-monetary characteristics need to be incorporated into the analysis when looking at career success. Gunz and Heslin (2005) outline the idea of the subjective career and explain that researchers need not shy away from including subjective criteria in their studies on career success since patterns of shared meaning emerge in subjective criteria of success because

careers are socially constructed. Heslin (2003, 2005) also notes that self- and other-referent criteria of success should be incorporated in order to measure success in a meaningful way.

Fourthly, it is crucial to note that the effects which ECA participation produces are not uniform or indeed all positive. Various researchers have found that the returns to extracurricular participation vary according to gender (Eccles & Barber, 1999; Long & Caudill, 1991), type of activity (Barber, 1999; Barber, Eccles & Stone, 2001; Broh, 2002), degree of structure of the activity (Mahoney & Stattin, 2000; Zaff, Moore, Papillo & Williams, 2003), and level of participation of the individual (Fredricks & Eccles, 2006). Participation can have negative effects on a host of developmental outcomes largely due to the peer group with which members associate themselves while engaging in the activity (Eccles & Barber, 1999; Barber, Eccles & Stone, 2001). Equally important is Marsh and Kleitman's (2002) finding that when it comes to extracurricular activities, there is evidence supporting a threshold model which states that moderate amounts of participation are beneficial to the participant but that beyond an optimal point they experience diminishing marginal returns to their investment in ECAs. As the authors put it, be aware of "the good, the bad and the non-linear" (Marsh & Kleitman, 2002).

Finally, where positive effects have been found in empirical studies, they have been correlational and therefore subject to the criticism that they result from self-selection (Gilman, 2004; Feldman & Matjasko, 2005). Essentially, the issue here is that career success and participation in extracurricular activities could potentially be jointly determined by some other factor which is unobservable or unobserved. Although there are the usual econometric methods of addressing this difficulty in empirical research, it is important to be aware that, because of the voluntary nature of extracurricular activities, it will continue to be an issue.

CONCLUSION

Despite the many problems associated with research into the link between ECA participation and career success, further research is worth pursuing because of its relevance to students, universities, recruiters and policymakers. Collecting new data and borrowing from ecological systems theory would be the two key features of a new approach which would attempt to blend the existing findings from economics, sociology,

psychology, social psychology and careers literature in order to give a more comprehensive picture of the issue. Although this may appear over-ambitious, the final word should be reserved for Marsh and Kleitman (2002) who note that “whereas it is unlikely that one design or approach will ever provide a definitive solution...accumulating evidence using a variety of different approaches provides increasingly stronger support for the generalisability of the benefits of participation in extracurricular activity” (p. 506).

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