THE ROLE OF STUDENT ORGANIZATIONS
AS A VEHICLE FOR PEER SUPPORT

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Due to the rigor of an engineering curriculum, most students band together to commiserate on the more difficult courses, to study together, and in general to encourage each other to continue to pursue a difficult curriculum in the face of academic, financial, or personal odds. The profession itself fosters this peer support by mentoring student chapters of professional organizations providing students access to speakers and awards at meetings directed to particular areas of interest. At the University of Hartford, we feel that active faculty and staff participation in engineering student organizations plays a key role in the retention of students. To support our conviction we have dedicated the salary equivalent of one fulltime professional staff person and one part-time clerical person to fostering the activities of nine engineering student organizations.

Exactly what role do these student organizations play in providing peer support resulting in greater student retention? First, they provide a rallying point around which students at different levels in their academic career can share information. As administrators, we know only too well how information passes from one student to another about a particular class or faculty member. By participating in the activities of the organization most closely associated with their major, students can judge for themselves if contact with particular faculty confirms or negates the information on the "grapevine".

Some engineering student organizations, particularly honoraries, provide tutoring services and archive tests for review purposes. Our observations indicate that although the tutors may be of high caliber, the tutoring services are poorly used by their target audience, and that test material is quickly out of date in many subject areas. Therefore, we do not feel that these services are integral to retention.

Secondly, student organizations provide an opportunity to learn how the professional chapters operate through attendance at regional and national conferences and local meetings. This insider's view gives students a chance to

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see what the organization has to offer them upon graduation to professional status and how the organization influences the standards and practices they will follow in their career. Since student meetings are for the most part loosely organized, particularly at smaller schools, this exposure to the rules and procedures of the larger organization can seem quite bureaucratic. Therefore, to retain student interest, it is best to be sure they will be present at meetings where the program is so enticing that they are willing to deal with the intricate process of association business.

This brings us to what is probably the most important aspect of the retention of students - the programming provided by student organizations. To retain students in school you must keep their interest. If they feel that the curriculum is too difficult, too boring or is requiring too much of their time, we must find some reason for them to maintain their desire to pursue an engineering career rather than changing majors. The programming provided by engineering student organizations serves to keep the "spark" ignited - to stimulate and confirm the excitement that the students felt when they decided that engineering was for them. This means that frequently the programs must highlight the glamour industries or engineering achievements rather than the mundane design problems that engineers typically face in the areas where most of them will be employed. Programs which feature astronauts, genetic engineering, or entrepreneurs who started with one invention typically draw large attendance and are discussed in the hallways and cafeterias for weeks before and after the event.

The second type of program which engages the student is directed at employment opportunities. Most engineering students face increasing college costs. Therefore, they are continually searching for part-time and co-op opportunities, or upon graduation look for the highest salary possible to begin defraying loans. Programs are in high demand which relay specific skills necessary to obtaining a good job: interviewing tips, resume writing, and in general, corporate recruiters willing to describe the job functions given to entry level engineers. The financial compensation discussed at these types of programs gives hope to the student who is considering dropping out for financial reasons.

Programs with a purely social motive may be one of the best retention strategies. Students frequently complain that they spend so much time in the lab or studying that they rarely have a chance to socialize. The opportunity to meet other students with like interests at a sports event or other occasion gives the students a chance to blow off steam and heightens their image of their institution and their peers. At the University of Hartford we have found that adding a community service aspect to these social occasions lessens the chance of antisocial behavior and
increases students' self-esteem as they feel less self conscious about having a good time if they are helping others. An example of this phenomenon is the fact that organizing a volleyball game for purely social enjoyment drew less of a crowd that when the game was organized to benefit the local children's hospital.

Several engineering organizations are directed at students who are traditionally under-represented in technical fields. At the University of Hartford we have a student chapter of the Society of Women Engineers. In addition to maintaining academic interest, these organizations heighten the awareness of the student body to the barriers students may face upon employment. Through personal case histories they provide strategies for dealing with discrimination, sexual harassment, and in general advise students on the need for networking early in their careers and mentoring those students who come after them.

What makes engineering student organizations more critical to retaining students than general university student organization? After all, they all provide leadership opportunities which we tend to feel is one of the important aspects of student participation. The problem is that in University organizations the membership is many times larger, so students tend to get to know only a small number of members. The pool of available officer material is larger, so students may never get a chance to acquire the leadership skills they seek.

Our research on our own student population indicates that many students regard officer duties, regardless of the type of organization, as a burden rather than as a positive experience. Particularly in a small school, the same group of six or eight students tends to hold office in more than one organization. Therefore, we would not tend to regard this as having intrinsic value to the retention of students.

Finally, engineering student organizations provide recognition to students who exhibit particular academic achievements in the classroom and at the podium in technical paper and project competitions. This positive reinforcement from faculty and experts in their field gives the student confidence that they have chosen the right profession and spurs them to continue in their course of study.

So, how can we, as administrators, increase the retention role of the engineering student organization? First, we need to recognize that there are four underlying factors that determine the effectiveness of using student organization activities as a retention strategy: 1) the amount of autonomy a college offers a student organization, 2) the student body's perception of the student organization's power or prestige, 3) the nature of the college environment, and 4) the competence, diversity, and stability of the student organization's membership.

Autonomy is very important to retention, If students
feel they have some control over their curriculum or the atmosphere in which they study, they are more apt to care about their progress. The more autonomy an organization has, particularly financially, the greater the perception that they can influence the outcome of problems that require the expenditure of funds. An example of how this has influenced is that one of our student organizations bought computers for a loan program so that students who could not conveniently use the computer lab during its regular hours of operation could borrow a computer for the semester, increasing the quality and volume of their output.

The nature of the college environment is very important in increasing retention. Student organizations add to that environment socially and intellectually. If the organizations do not feel they have enough interaction with faculty and staff outside the classroom or than the administration is indifferent to their concerns, retention quickly becomes a problem which snowballs. The institution is certainly not going to terminate employees because they are too busy, or physically unable to participate in student events or because they're just been around long enough to feel that they did their part as untenured faculty. However, those attitudes soon infect the college atmosphere and it may take several generations of students to loose that ennui.

That competence, diversity and stability of an organization's membership is best exhibited when they take on a large project such as the organization of a regional or national conference. This activity is an effective admission and retention strategy. The publicity generated heightens the public's awareness of the college's curriculum and the excitement generated within the current student body serves to revitalize and energize the student body. A conference committee makes everyone more aware of the organization that is necessary for a successful event, and the need to do well in their major in order to have time for conference activities.

Currently, we are investigating the possibility of employing these four underlying factors by networking our student chapters with other similar chapters at other institutions through BITNET or a computer conferencing system. This would allow for more frequent interactions, particularly with commuters and part-time student who may not be able to come to regularly scheduled meetings on campus. It would allow students to share ideas with peers and mentors at times which are convenient to their schedules and decrease isolation for students who are out of the academic environment on co-op or who are in the minority on their campus. In this way we hope to increase the benefits of student organization membership as well as fulfill our administrative retention goals many times over.

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