

Where Do I Belong? Graduate Student's Sense of Belonging Within Professional Organizations Representing Agricultural Education Communication and Leadership

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Introduction/Need for Research

The history of professional organizations in the agricultural education discipline is rich and abiding (Connors, 2021). Many of these organizations have grown to include agricultural communication and leadership, such as the American Association of Agricultural Education (AAAE) (Connors, 2021). There have been significant advantages for graduate students to be involved in professional organizations, regardless of their field, as they build vital connections that can assist them in their future careers (Wetcho et al., 2022). Membership in these types of organizations allows graduate student members to present their work at national conferences, showcase their research, and build professional relationships (Connors, 2021; Curry et al., 2015). However, only some graduate students belong to professional organizations (Michael et al., n.d.; Desmond & Symens, 1997). Therefore, investigators seek to determine how graduate student members react regarding membership and sense of belonging in organizations representing the agricultural education, communication, and leadership (AECL) discipline.

Theoretical Framework

Sense of belonging theory serves as the guiding theoretical framework for this study. Graduate student sense of belonging is multifaceted (Strayhorn, 2018). This means individuals desire to feel connected to their university, with other students, and in professional communities or organizations. The greater a student's sense of belonging, the greater their academic outcomes, such as higher academic achievement and increased retention, are positive outcomes (Hausmann et al., 2007; Rhee, 2008). A low sense of belonging can negatively affect students, including impaired academic progress and low engagement, which are counterproductive to the progression and development of graduate students (Deci & Rydan, 2000).

Methodology

Researchers utilized an exploratory case study that "investigates distinct phenomena characterized by a lack of detailed preliminary research" (Mills et al., 2010, p. 2). Case studies are a methodological tool for descriptive, exploratory, and explanatory research (Yin, 1994; Creswell, 1998). Since graduate student engagement and membership roles in AECL professional organizations are a phenomenon that has yet to receive much investigation, researchers used an exploratory case study approach. The target audience for this study is graduate student members in six of the most prominent AECL professional organizations or groups, including the American Association for Agricultural Education (AAAE), the Association for Communication Excellence (ACE), the North American Colleges and Teachers of Agriculture (NACTA), the Association for International Agricultural and Extension Education (AIAEE), the Association for Leadership Educators (ALE), and the National Agricultural Communications Symposium (NACS). These organizations were chosen based on the size and scope of their mission, representing the AECL discipline. This study includes master's and doctoral students who pay their annual dues to be active members. Semi-structured virtual interviews were conducted to collect data with six participants. A semi-structured interview is a verbal questionnaire best suited for collecting information regarding an individual's perceptions or opinions (Fraenkel et al., 2018; Astedt-Kurki & Heikkinen, 1994; Barriball & White, 1994). Researchers coded data using a three-stage open coding process (Stake, 1994). Codes were then combined to develop themes and subthemes, which serve as the findings of this study.

Results/Findings

Participants identified multiple benefits of being a student member of a professional organization in the AECL discipline, which was the first key theme. Participant 1 stated that professional organizations provide graduate students with opportunities “to meet people and have genuine experiences with them.” The lower registration and membership cost was also echoed among all participants. Participant 2 said, “Obviously, a benefit is that it is a reduced cost because...grad students usually do not have a ton of money.” There are opportunities for greater student recognition in professional organizations to ensure students feel valued and included. The second theme centered on student challenges in organizations. While students may outnumber professionals at conferences, they often have difficulties voicing their concerns or opinions. Two participants were unaware of their organization's student representative, contributing to students' unease in voicing concerns. Professional organizations also need to find ways to engage students outside of the annual conferences so that students can get the most out of their memberships. Participant 2 suggested a listserv of all graduate members for increased engagement, and Participant 1 suggested regional tours would be a great way to engage graduate students. Participant 3 wanted more guidance when presenting research or posters, while Participant 4 suggested that organizations could benefit from having a student representative on the governing boards of these organizations. Overall, it was evident through the responses that graduate students benefit from their membership in these organizations. However, there is space for organizations to grow their engagement and opportunities for graduate student members to foster a higher sense of belonging.

Conclusions & Implications

The study was consistent with the literature, showing that students benefited significantly from memberships in professional organizations, including networking opportunities and professional development (Michael et al., 2016). This contributed to their sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2018). Participants clearly articulated student membership's benefits, including reduced cost of membership and conference registration fees, access to faculty and staff from across the country, and recognition for their research. However, there are opportunities for improvement to ensure graduate students continue to feel valued and belong. Throughout the interviews, all participants were adamant that the benefits of student membership outweighed the negative aspects of membership. There is still room for improvement, particularly surrounding student voice and engagement on a national scale. Multiple participants acknowledged that organizations needed to increase student engagement.

Recommendations/Impact on the Profession

There are action steps to increase students' sense of belonging in professional AECL organizations. Ensuring students understand the communication channels available is an approach, whether through a graduate representative or an assigned board member to whom they can speak. Students need to feel comfortable sharing their thoughts for transparency. This could also include creating a focused student network like the Association of Leadership Educators. Engagement throughout the year and recognition of achievements can help students feel valued in their chosen organizations. Researchers recommend that all organizations investigated in this study investigate new methods for graduate students' involvement and consider adding graduate student representatives to their governing boards.

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