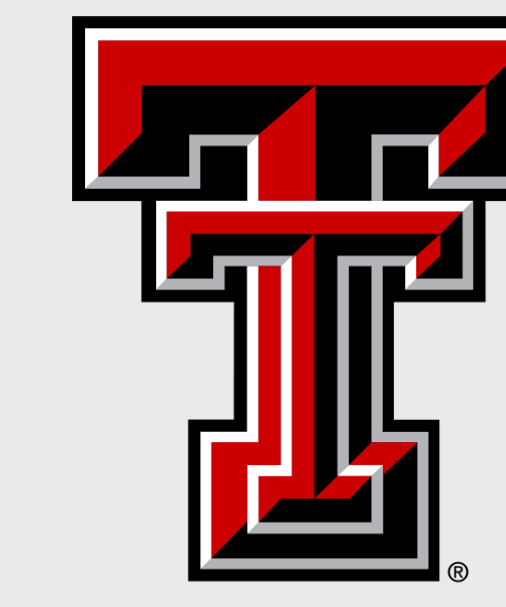


Where Do I Belong? Graduate Students Sense of Belonging Within Professional Organizations Representing Agricultural Education, Communication, and Leadership



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INTRODUCTION

- 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, many graduate students do not belong to professional organizations (Michael et al., n.d.; Desmond & Symens, 1997).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

- Sense of belonging theory combines multiple aspects of what makes students feel like they belong (Strayhorn, 2018)
- Graduate students want to feel accepted and connected within professional organizations (Hausmann et al., 2007; Rhee, 2008)



- Alternatively, a low sense of belonging can negatively affect students which can be counterproductive to their progression and development (Deci & Ryan, 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 utilized as 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.
- Semi-structured virtual interviews were conducted to collect data.
- 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

Theme 1: There are multiple benefits of being a student member of a professional organization.

- Opportunity for new professional relationships with faculty members and other graduate students from across the country.
- Affordable registration costs and availability of travel scholarships.
- Recognition of work through graduate awards, although more work is needed in this space to recognize more graduate students for their work.

"Obviously, a benefit is that it is a reduced cost because... grad students usually do not have a ton of money"

Participant 2

"To meet people and have a genuine experience with them"

Participant 1

Theme 2: Student challenges within professional organizations

- Voicing concerns and opinions can be daunting for students because there is no defined channel to do so.
- Not all organizations have a student representative, and some students are unaware of who the student representative is in their organization. This also contributes to student unease in voicing concerns.
- Student engagement needs to increase so students can get the most out of their membership, particularly outside of conferences.
 - Participant 2 suggested a listserv for all graduate members to increase communication.
 - Participant 1 suggested that regional tours would better engage student members in order for them to interact.
 - Participant 3 wanted more guidance when presenting a research paper or posters for first-time attendees.
 - Participants 2 and 4 suggested that organizations could benefit from having a student representative on their governing boards.

CONCLUSIONS & IMPLICATIONS

- The study was consistent with the literature, showing that students benefit significantly from memberships in professional organizations, including networking opportunities and professional development (Michael et al., 2016), and that this contributes to their sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2018).
 - These benefits contribute to their sense of belonging to their chosen organization.
- Participants expressed that the benefits of student membership outweighed any negative aspects of membership.
- The most notable benefits included:
 - Reduced cost of membership and conference registration fees.
 - Access to faculty and staff from across the country.
 - Recognition for their research.
- 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 but did not recognize how to do so.

RECOMMENDATIONS/IMPACT ON THE PROFESSION

- AECL organizations should develop goals and action steps to increase graduate students' sense of belonging within their organization.
- 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 within organizations and with organization leaders.
 - This could include creating a focused student network like the Association of Leadership Educators (ALE) has in place.
- Engagement throughout the year and recognition of achievements can help students feel valued within their chosen organizations.

ABSTRACT AND REFERENCES

