Extracurricular Activities in Chinese Higher Education

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At lunchtime, several students make their way down a tree-lined street toward the campus dining hall, passing athletic fields and residence halls. Peking University Health Sciences Center (PUHSC), located in the city of Beijing, is an institution that looks very much like several college campuses in the United States. Similarly, PUHSC and other universities in the People’s Republic of China share comparable characteristics to institutions in the United States.

Extracurricular activities are a component of higher education in which both nations share similarities and differences. This comparative paper will analyze extracurricular activities in Chinese colleges in comparison to the United States. It will begin with a literature review of extracurricular activities in both countries. Following the literature review will be a description of the methods for data collection and then a presentation of the findings.

Literature Review

Extracurricular Involvement in the United States

The role of extracurricular activities. Extracurricular activities are a salient avenue for student involvement in the U.S. higher education system. Involvement is positively related to satisfaction with the college experience (Astin, 1984, as cited in Strapp & Farr, 2010). Involvement helps students connect with their institutions and develop attachment that encourages exploration (Astin, 1984, as cited in Strapp & Farr, 2010). Campus involvement also appears to foster higher levels of psychosocial development (Foubert & Grainger, 2006). A university’s focus on engagement can create a campus environment that is ripe with opportunities for students to grow and develop (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). Some of the most visible extracurricular activities in the United States include athletic, Greek-letter, political, religious, arts, and minority-based student organizations (Baker, 2007). With such a large
selection of organizations available for students at each institution, involvement is the responsibility of the individual student (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009).

Motivation. There are varying reasons that motivate students to become involved. Participation in clubs have been associated with satisfaction with job market preparation, further study preparation, and overall collegiate experience (Strapp & Farr, 2010). Ultimately, the campus environment plays a considerable role on the level of student involvement. Integration of student engagement involves a reciprocal relationship between students and the campus (Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009). Another motivating factor may be the opportunity to engage in community service, which shares a significant relationship with leadership development (Dugan, 2006). According to Dugan, service emerges as a potent vehicle through which socially responsible leadership may be achieved (2006).

Retention for underrepresented students. Finally, extracurricular activities have also played a role in an emerging trend in the United States: the rising enrollment of underrepresented students. The enrollment of minority students in higher education has increased over the past 30 years, in both absolute terms and as a proportion of the student body (Fischer, 2007). Extracurricular activities may play a role in the retention and graduation rates of underrepresented college students. Involvement in activities serves to integrate students more into campus life, which ultimately increases the likelihood of persistence (Fischer, 2007). Black and Latino college students have shown to benefit academically from organizational involvement (Baker, 2007). According to Baker, it is important to consider the type of student organizations in which minority students are involved (2007). For instance, the amount of time that underrepresented students spend participating in an extracurricular activity will not significantly affect their academic performance; instead it is the type of activity that will impact their
academic performance (Baker, 2007). This is a distinct role that extracurricular activities play in U.S. higher education that is unique from institutions in China.

**Extracurricular Involvement in China**

**Limited understanding.** There is a lack of in-depth research in English that explores the extracurricular involvement of Chinese college students. However, there is a substantial amount of quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-method studies conducted by researchers in China based upon an initial examination of online-based Chinese repositories. According to Braswell and Boone (1991) student participation in clubs and student organizations is “very important for a student’s progress and for a favorable job assignment after graduation” (p. 25). This motivating factor is shared among students in the United States, though Braswell and Boone’s work appears to present this factor as the only reason behind extracurricular involvement for students in China. Furthermore, Chinese higher education has undergone significant changes since Braswell and Boone’s work, which may have resulted in other factors to consider.

**The role of volunteerism.** Other studies that have examined extracurricular involvement among Chinese students were focused on volunteerism through on-campus clubs and organizations. Hustinx et al. (2010), through survey data comparing volunteerism among six different countries, showed that Chinese students engaged in volunteerism out of a desire to help others and to make new friends. Career progress was found as a lower priority compared to these two factors, which contrasts the perspective brought forth by Braswell and Boone. Altruistic and value-driven motivations were ranked as the highest measure among all countries, including China (Hustinx et al., 2010).

**Ideological education and civic responsibility.** A broader goal of extracurricular activities is to promote civic engagement and civic responsibility. In China, this point has not
been lost among the government and educational policymakers through ensuring that ideological and political education be persistent throughout campus life; particularly through the Communist Youth League. The manner of this education, however, has changed as the nature of extracurricular involvement has diversified. In particular, student organizations outside of the Youth League have grown and become common for undergraduate students to develop social and leadership skills (Tu and Sa, 2010). Students engaged in these programs expected the skills gained in the organizations to carry over outside of the university environment. The mixed-methods study also revealed that students felt that the older political education curriculum was "outdated" and "impractical" in comparison to newer forms of civic engagement through student-run organizations (Tu and Sa, 2010, p. 12).

Methods

Data collection for this comparative paper was achieved through ethnographic methods. The sample for the data collection included administrators, faculty, and students from Beijing Normal University, Capital Normal University, and Peking University Health Sciences Campus. These appointments were mutually set up between Dr. Tracy Tambascia and administrators from each respective university. Each institution generated the itinerary for the meetings in addition to selecting their student representatives. The primary method of data collection was through observation and short interviews with administrators, faculty, and administrators. Interviews were conducted via in-person conversations, formal presentations, and question and answer panels. A total of fifteen students and four staff members were interviewed.

Findings

Nature of Extracurricular Involvement
At the three institutions where data was gathered, the nature of extracurricular involvement is generally similar to that of the United States. According to Dr. Ellen Wang at Capital Normal University (CNU), their campus has over 100 student organizations, with approximately 12 organizations for each of the 10 colleges at the university. The clubs are all student organized and student-run (personal communication, June 26, 2013). This demonstrates that students at CNU are engaged in organizing activities outside of the classroom and maintain some degree of self-initiation in running and maintaining the organizations. Dr. Wang highlighted the English Club and the Student Union as two particular organizations that are active in the College of Foreign Languages at CNU. The English Club organizes activities on campus related to American culture and English language skills, while the Student Union acts as a form of student government that organizes and promotes campus-wide events and contests (personal communication, June 26, 2013). Dr. Jiangting Chu of Beijing Normal University (BNU) described a student-run peer mentoring system at the Faculty of Education, providing an opportunity for upperclassmen to mentor incoming freshmen (personal communication, June 27, 2013). This program is similar to other on-campus transitional mentoring programs developed in academic support services or cultural centers in the United States.

In the United States, student organizations are typically given some flexibility through student government to allocate and distribute funding to student groups, usually by means of a student services fee. This structure is particularly different at Chinese universities such as BNU. At BNU, student programs receive funding via applications to the university administration, where the programmatic funding is then under the oversight of the Chinese government (J. Chu, June 27, 2013). As such, both interviews and observations consistently revealed that extracurricular activities at universities in China have a strong focus toward community service.
In particular, each student that was interviewed was engaged in some form of community service project; as part of a club or a larger campus-wide opportunity organized by the administration. The topic of the Youth League, which is a component of the Communist Party of China (CPC) was not touched upon in depth by students and staff. However, presented materials during campus visits highlighted the role of the Youth League in off-campus service projects in the rural western and northern regions of China. It is likely that a heavy emphasis on community service is an extension of the intellectual and political education present at universities in China, in line with broader socialist philosophy.

Administrators and students were particular in highlighting the service aspect of work outside of the classroom. Tracy, a student at CNU, was involved with the Volunteer Club at the College of Foreign Languages. She described that the club was one of the larger clubs on campus, and was involved in service projects throughout parts of rural China, which included some language instruction (personal communication, June 26, 2013). Dr. Wensheng Li of Peking University Health Sciences Campus (PUHSC) described the Summer Social Practice program as a summer-long service program where students engage in service learning throughout China through teaching and field clinics in rural areas (personal communication, June 28, 2013).

**Motivation**

While students and faculty stressed service work as a prominent appeal of extracurricular involvement, interviews with students showed a personal stake behind such involvement. Sunny, a graduate student at CNU, expressed that her involvement in clubs and the Student Union was motivated due to the fact that her time in secondary school was focused solely on academics. She saw that being involved in clubs and the Student Union were tied to her own
personal interests, and would also help her stand out in her career search once she finished her program (personal communication, June 26, 2013). Using involvement as a way to develop skills that would be transferrable in the workplace represents the degree of understanding in transferrable skills, a concept only beginning to be explored among Chinese students and administrators (personal communication, S. Yin, June 25, 2013). Students interviewed at PUHSC also described their extracurricular involvements as a way to “take a break” from the intense rigor of their academic programs (personal communication, June 28, 2013).

Administration expressed a desire for students to be involved outside of the classroom. Dr. Wang described that she has emphasized student involvement and engagement in her personal advising sessions with students (personal communication, June 26, 2013). There is an understanding that student engagement and connection with the campus through activities can work to the benefit of the student. At the same time, a student at PUHSC described a common scenario to students in the United States who overextend themselves with involvement. She described that during her first two years, she was involved in too many clubs, which resulted in stress that adversely affected her academics (personal communication, June 28, 2013). Regardless, the student reflected positively in her involvement and expressed a desire to have better balanced her involvement.

**Student Development**

The motivations for involvement for Chinese students in higher education mirrored those of students in the United States. There was a desire to find opportunities to explore areas of interest outside of the classroom. Students were also interested in using involvement as a means of personal investment to stand out when faced with job searching in the future. However, the work of Dr. Hua Bai of BNU showed that extracurricular involvement is but one of many factors
that contributed to a positive experience at Chinese universities. His work examined undergraduate student development using measurements from a Chinese-localized version of the Community College Student Experiences Questionnaire (CCSEQ) and qualitative interviews with students at three universities in China (personal communication, June 27, 2013). He cited that campus environment had the largest impact out of all the factors. Though extracurricular played a lesser role, he described that the social activities present in extracurricular involvement showed a positive effect on vocational preparation (personal communication, June 27, 2013). This echoes the sentiments of students that expressed the desire for involvement to assist in their job search.

Additionally, Dr. Zhang Chi, the Associate Dean of the Graduate School at BNU, suggests that there is a transformative change occurring in how masters programs are organized, including admissions processes. In admissions, institutions are recognizing that test scores do not paint the entire picture of an applicant (Zho Zhiyong, personal communication, June 27, 2013). Consequently, involvement in extracurricular activities may become important as undergraduate Chinese students prepare for admission into graduate programs.

**Other factors affecting extra-curricular involvement**

The willingness of colleges and universities to move toward a student-centered model is particularly important. Dr. Hua Bai stated that students’ personal and family background has little impact on their own personal development, so it is on the university and its faculty and staff to help provide that environment (personal communication, June 27, 2013). Additionally, both staff and students have strong ties to the government that will dictate whether Chinese higher education can become student-centered. For instance, administrators are tasked with upholding ideological and political education. On the other hand, there is motivation for students to work
in coordination with the government as the government provides funding for student activities, as long as they meet certain requirements set forth by the government (Dr. Jiangting Chu, personal communication, June 27, 2013). Dr. Chu also adds that as it currently stands, faculty actually control student unions as opposed to the students, and this is the largest contrast between US and Chinese colleges, in regard to extracurricular activities. Because of this dynamic, students are not allowed to protest on any topics through student associations or the student union (personal communication, June 27, 2013).

Finally, one other factor that may inhibit student participation in extracurricular activities is the academic curriculum. Academic curriculum may vary between institutions and between academic majors, however it is important to consider whether some curriculums allow for students to participate in non-academic activities. For instance, a few students at PUHSC stated that they were a part of an eight-year program in which they would earn a medical doctorate after three years of classroom instruction and five years of residency. This is an intensive program that allows students to earn a medical degree in a shorter amount of time. However, the students shared that a curriculum like this rarely provides an opportunity to volunteer or participate in campus activities.

Conclusion

Extracurricular activities are largely similar between institutions of higher education in the United States and the People’s Republic of China. The informants have indicated that key similarities include the type of activities offered and the motivations for participation. In contrast, transferrable skills earned through these activities are still a relatively new concept for Chinese universities to understand. Furthermore, education scholars argue that power should be re-inserted to the students to have a more central role in the management and functioning of their
universities. This will be a key trend to observe and research as the Chinese higher education system continues to develop and expand in the wake of globalization.
References


