

**In this issue...**

After reviewing the existing research on co-curricular activity participation, Alliance member Bryan Shelly, assistant professor at Wake Forest University, concludes that co-curricular advocates need take a back seat to no one in terms of the quality of the data that supports our position.

# The Advocate

Volume 2, Issue 4

May 2009

## The Research: Where It Is and Where It Is Going

By Dr. Bryan Shelly

About 18 months ago and thanks to Alliance for Student Activities executive board members Lyn Fiscus, Mike Smith, and others, I decided that the effects of participation in co-curricular activities should be a large part of my research agenda. Based on my limited knowledge at the time, I thought the existing research base was very small and that I would have to do extensive original research to document these effects. I was mistaken. Every article I found seemed to lead to three others that, in total, provided an extensive base of high quality research that shows co-curricular participation helps promote almost every positive student outcome one could want to see, from higher standardized test scores to lower rates of deviant behavior to higher wages as an adult. These effects are independent of any other factor. Co-curricular activities show an effect not because they attract more empowered students but because they empower students.

### High Quality Research

The best starting place for anyone looking to understand the scholarly literature on co-curricular participation is Feldman and Matjasko's "The Role of School-Based Extracurricular Activities in Adolescent Development: a Comprehensive Review and Future Directions" (2005). The authors summarize the findings of approximately 50 peer-reviewed journal articles and report that participation in co-curriculars is associated with improved academic performance, better psychological adjustment, and reduced chances of dropout, substance abuse, and sexual activity. Many of these studies are social science of the highest quality. For example, several articles use as their basis findings from the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988, which surveyed the same 4,250 students in 1988, 1990, 1992, 1994, and 2000 and thus allows researchers to learn a great deal about the effects of co-curricular partici-

pation that endure long after a student has graduated. Such studies would easily pass the requirement from *No Child Left Behind* that government money should fund only those programs backed by "scientifically based research."

What is most exciting about Feldman and Matjasko's article is that it provides an easy way to find articles that will provide the extensive statistical data we advocates need to effectively argue to the educational establishment that they should support the expansion of opportunities for participation. Those who saw my presentation at the National Conference on Student Activities last December may remember that one study shows that participation in student government alone led to 1.6 to 2.1 percent increase in standardized test scores in math, science, English, and social studies (Davila and Mora 2007). We can express the findings of almost every study Feldman and Matjasko cite in a similar fashion, a task for which Wake Forest has funded a research assistant for me this summer. His final project will be to present the findings Feldman and Matjasko cite in an accessible document of no more than five pages, meaning we should soon be able to provide the hard, statistical facts that principals, superintendents, school boards, and state and federal officials demand in the language they understand.

### Studies Show Positive Effects

The most encouraging part of my analysis to this point is that co-curricular advocates need take a back seat to no one in terms of the quality of the data that supports our position. The studies that show co-curriculars work are numerous and of a quality equal to, or better than, studies that show the positive effects of things like the federal Free and Reduced Lunch Program (and, teachers will not be surprised to learn, far superior to the evidence that shows standardized testing helps students learn). The next steps are to make these findings acces-

Co-curricular activities show an effect not because they attract more empowered students but because they empower students.

sible and make sure they end up in the hands of the decision makers that govern modern public education. We hope to be able to bring you the digest of statistics described above no later than January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2010. In the meantime, if your principal has declared that the school must raise science test scores, promote volunteerism, or achieve some other goal in 2009–2010 school year, please contact the Alliance and we will prioritize getting you the data you need as quickly as possible.



Bryan Shelly ([shellybt@wfu.edu](mailto:shellybt@wfu.edu)) is an assistant professor in the Department of Political Science at Wake Forest University. He welcomes the opportunity to discuss or explain any aspect of the research discussed here and encourages readers to contact him or the Alliance.

## Further Reading

Davila, Alberto, and Marie T. Mora. 2007. "Civic engagement and high school academic progress: An analysis using NELS data." In *CIRCLE Working Papers*. Medford, MA: CIRCLE.

Feldman, Amy F., and Jennifer L. Matjasko. 2005. "The role of school-based extracurricular activities in adolescent development: A comprehensive review and future directions." *Review of Educational Research* 75 (2):159.

*The Advocate* is published five times per year by the Alliance for Student Activities, a nonprofit corporation whose mission is to promote the value of cocurricular student activities and to provide professional development and support for advisors and future advisors.

### Board of Directors:

Mike Smith, President

Lyn Fiscus, Vice President

Ann Postlewaite, Secretary

John Glimco, Treasurer

© 2009 Alliance for Student Activities. Permission is granted for Alliance members to photocopy this newsletter and distribute it locally to support the value of their activity program.

Submissions of student activities research for publication are welcome. Send inquiries to [lyn@alliance4studentactivities.org](mailto:lyn@alliance4studentactivities.org).

For more information visit:

[www.alliance4studentactivities.org](http://www.alliance4studentactivities.org)