

Title: "Infrequently Asked Questions: Campus Clubs in the Non-Profit Sector"

Author: Benjamin Miller

Published in: *The Philanthropist*, Journal

ISSN 2562-1491

Date: February 15, 2016

Original Link: <https://thephilanthropist.ca/2016/02/infrequently-asked-questions-campus-clubs-in-the-non-profit-sect/>

Date of PDF Download: June 23, 2019

Infrequently Asked Questions: Campus Clubs in the Non-Profit Sector

By Benjamin Miller

SUMMARY: Graduate student Benjamin Miller believes that non-profit organizations (NPOs) and Canada's non-profit sector as a whole could benefit from recognizing campus clubs as unique members of the non-profit sector, and by engaging, supporting, and learning from them. Working with campus clubs may help to unlock important areas of common interest among students, post-secondary institutions, and NPOs, most significantly in the areas of increased capacity, skill building, training, and succession. Among the benefits NPOs can reap by working with campus clubs are unique visibility on campus, increased access to infrastructure and funding, powerful and self-motivating recruitment tools, and unmatched leadership development potential. NPOs, for their part, have much to offer students. The article concludes with suggestions for NPOs who wish to develop these ties.

RÉSUMÉ : Benjamin Miller, étudiant universitaire de cycle supérieur, croit que les organismes sans but lucratif (OSBL) et l'ensemble du secteur communautaire canadien auraient avantage à reconnaître les clubs formés sur les campus comme des membres à un titre particulier du secteur communautaire, et à nouer des relations avec eux, à les soutenir et à apprendre à leur contact. Le travail avec ces clubs peut aider à démontrer que les étudiants, les établissements postsecondaires et les OSBL ont en commun d'importants domaines d'intérêt, plus particulièrement l'accroissement des capacités, le renforcement des compétences, la formation et la relève. Les avantages que pourraient retirer les OSBL en travaillant avec les clubs formés sur les campus comptent notamment : une visibilité unique sur les campus, un meilleur accès à l'infrastructure et au financement, des outils de recrutement très efficaces et motivateurs, et un potentiel inégalé de développement du leadership. En outre, les OSBL ont beaucoup à offrir aux étudiants. L'article se termine par des suggestions aux OSBL qui désirent développer ces liens.

The past few decades have been a time of monumental shifts. Whether one considers the increasing demographic pressure of baby-boomers retiring, the constant exhilaration of exponentially growing technological innovation, or the deep restructuring of the welfare state, these societal transformations have direct implications for Canada's non-profit sector. For instance, we find fewer Canadians donating time and money to volunteer causes (Turcotte, 2015), the devolution of more and more social services from government to the sector (Curtis, 2009), and new types of organizations, like social enterprises,

emerging out of popular and legal dissatisfaction with traditional distinctions between private and public interest. The challenge to the non-profit sector is as simple to articulate as it is complex to address: the sector must do much more with much less while radically re-thinking its limits, purposes, and membership.

While there are no simple answers and likely no silver bullet to these twin problems of efficiency and identity, this article will suggest that individual non-profit organizations (NPOs) and Canada's non-profit sector as a whole can address both of these problems at the same time by recognizing campus clubs as unique members of the non-profit sector, and by engaging, supporting, and learning from them. This recognition and engagement has the potential to unlock important areas of common interest between students, post-secondary institutions, and NPOs, most significantly in the areas of increased capacity, skill building, training, and succession. However, campus clubs are places where much happens but little is ever formally discussed. This article will therefore make its case by posing and answering some basic questions about these clubs. Leveraging personal experience, academic literature, and original data, the answers will show why campus clubs are worth engaging and what further work needs to be done to make this engagement possible and fruitful.

To begin, let me acknowledge some of the reasons why one might be sceptical about investing limited time and energy into campus clubs. First, it is difficult to say what campus clubs actually accomplish in the aggregate. Second, people with direct experience of clubs may have as many negative memories of frustrating inefficiencies as they have positive memories of real outcomes and impact. Finally, even for those who believe in the potential of campus clubs, there are many easier partnerships NPOs could focus on developing. These concerns will underpin much of the discussion that follows.

Q: What do campus clubs do?

The difficulty just mentioned of stating with any accuracy what campus clubs accomplish in the aggregate stems from the fact that there is practically no data on the outcomes or even scope of campus club activities. A few years ago, however, through a simple analysis of university and student union websites across Canada, I was able to get some grasp of the scope of campus clubs in Canada. In 2013-14, there were 7,488 campus clubs active in Canadian universities (in addition to many more on college campuses that were not part of the study). Of these, 34.6% (2,593) were common interest groups, 22.2% (1,648) were cause-based, 20.7% (1,554) were academic/faculty associations, 12.9% (963) were cultural, 6.8% (511) were spiritual, 1.9% (144) were political, and 1% (75) were Greek societies. Even from this very limited data, we can infer that clubs organize fundraising, educational, and cultural events; raise awareness for political, health, and humanitarian causes; and provide students and community members with emotional support, academic help, and a social network of common-minded people. In short, campus clubs engage in many of the same activities as NPOs.

The number and breadth of campus clubs indicates that they are an important contributor to the non-profit sector. However, to properly quantify this contribution in terms of both hours and dollars, more investigation is needed. Collecting this data could be done through a few small but important alterations to current research instruments. For example, the *General Social Survey: Giving, Volunteering and Participating* (GSS-GVP) fails to distinguish the general use of the word "club" from its specific meaning as a campus student organization (Statistics Canada, 2013). Careful use of the term "campus club" would make the survey far more sensitive to data in this area. Additionally, GSS-GVP questions about organization type currently push campus clubs into the "other" category and, as a result, valuable

detail is lost. Similarly, other research tools where one might expect more data on campus clubs, like the *National Survey of Student Engagement*, do not treat the campus club as a unit of analysis. Instead they ask about academic clubs specifically and capture all other types of campus clubs under “co-curricular hours,” a broad label that includes other, non-club activities as well (Centre for Post-Secondary Research, 2007). As a result, while data on campus clubs is already being collected, it is not categorized as such. Although there are considerable pressures on Canada’s data collection capacity, the “potentially valuable” nature of these comparatively minor changes should provide an incentive for government and researchers to at least consider making them. Introducing “campus club” as a distinct category into these and other research instruments would go a long way to providing the information needed to assess the contribution of clubs.

Another way to approach the question of what clubs do is to look at the unique contributions they make by virtue of their unique organizational attributes (as opposed to other non-profit organizations working in the same domain).

In order to understand the unique contribution of campus clubs, it is important to understand them as *fundamentally* learning organizations that are distinguished from other NPOs by two things: their educational context (i.e., the campus); and the low general and organization-specific experience level of members. This low level of experience is because campus clubs are normally made up of all or mostly youth, who may have little formal organizational training. Additionally, the turnover rates among clubs are necessarily higher than probably anywhere else in the non-profit sector, thereby limiting the amount of experience an individual can build in any particular club. Because most degree programs are four to five years long at most, and because students’ interest and circumstances can drastically change from year to year, succession planning needs to happen on an annual or, at most, bi-annual basis. Consequently, for clubs to survive, they must do a huge amount of teaching, often from square one, every single year. This “expertise” in succession planning and rapid teaching should be of interest to a sector that is in the midst of generational shift and its own succession issues.

What’s more, the sort of skills that need to be taught in a successful club—from fundraising, event planning and marketing, to volunteer coordination, administration, and governance—overlap considerably with the needs of NPOs. When I was first involved in founding the University of Ottawa Heart Institute Student Foundation and served as its VP-Secretary, I quickly learned why an agenda is so important for a productive meeting; why minutes are so important for accountability; and how establishing a consistent schedule maintains group discipline and manages volunteer expectations. This kind of learning experience is not like a classroom or workshop where you are given the answers in advance and the depth of your learning comes from understanding why those must be the right answers. Rather, it involves being forced to find answers by encountering very immediate needs (e.g., no one is coming to the meetings on time). When one finds a solution (e.g., a monthly workflow for member communications), one does not just accept them and write them down, but one internalizes them. As a result, campus clubs are like an informal non-profit sector training program on almost every university campus.

Campus clubs not only teach many specialized skills to their members by necessity, but they also teach a number of transferable skills quite accidentally. It is here that the academic research, although relatively scanty, is helpful (although it is not Canadian). Club participation (of all kinds) has been correlated with “critical thinking” (Gellin, 2003), “personal development” (Maureen, 2007), and “academic and affective growth” (Huang et al., 2004). Common-interest clubs, in particular, have been

shown to increase cross-cultural and cross-racial interactions, thereby also increasing participant knowledge and awareness of diversity and social justice issues (Davis, 2007; Harper et al., 2007; Luo & Jamison-Drake, 2009). In sum, club participation builds interpersonal skills and generally raises people's consciousness of more societal problems. These are all important skills and lessons for the citizens, donors, volunteers, and non-profit leaders of the future.

To summarize, campus clubs engage in a huge diversity of non-profit activities. Although we currently lack the data, it would be possible to get a much better idea of the hourly and monetary contributions of campus clubs by making some relatively small changes to current research instruments. Campus clubs by necessity and also "by accident" teach hard and soft skills that are vital for NPOs. Consequently, NPOs have an interest in understanding and tapping into this teaching ability more fully. As for the first concern about the actual impact of campus clubs, while it is too soon to speak with certainty, there are strong reasons to think that the impact on both communities and participants is considerable.

Q: What can clubs do for you?

Individual NPOs might be curious about whether they could benefit either from working with a club or by attempting to start a chapter on campus (something that many NPOs currently do). Campus clubs offer four vital kinds of benefits:

- unique visibility on campus,
- increased access to infrastructure and funding,
- powerful and self-motivating recruitment tools, and
- unmatched leadership development potential.

A note of caution: a decision to work with or start a club inevitably will come down to the particular capacities, constraints, and goals of each NPO, as well as the campus in question. The present discussion is a general one aimed at highlighting the potential benefits campus clubs can bring to non-profits. It should not be understood as recommending clubs for every case.

To begin, clubs offer unique visibility benefits in the form of an almost uncontested legitimacy within university spaces. There are few (if any) other spaces in society where non-profit messages have so little competition from for-profit sources. Because universities and colleges often have strict on-campus advertising policies, clubs posters may compete with each other for space, but they face (comparatively) little competition from outside sources. Consequently, certain spaces (e.g., student centres) come to be associated with clubs. Non-profit marketing takes on both the advantages (being accepted) and disadvantages (being treated as noise) of being totally expected by students. In my many years of "tabling" (i.e., standing by a table and handing out flyers, selling baked goods, etc.), I have seen some increased presence of for-profit tablers, but clubs maintain a clear edge. When it comes to approaching and engaging students, it has been my experience that club volunteers are far less likely to be treated as spam as compared to external for-profit organizations.

Second, almost always, student unions or universities provide campus clubs access to space and funding. Clubs are often allowed to book high-tech rooms on campus for free that would cost an external organization hundreds of dollars. At some universities, there is a set minimum amount of funding that every new club receives or for which each club is automatically eligible, from \$20 (e.g., Simon Fraser University) to \$750 (e.g., University of Alberta). Other universities provide global operations funding for club operations from \$100 (e.g., Carleton University) to \$2000 (e.g., Trinity

Western University). Most universities provide funding on an event-by-event basis with limits reaching upwards of \$7,500 (e.g., Thompson Rivers University). And many student unions, while not specifying a limit, promise to cover a percentage of an overall or event-specific budget, should it be approved (e.g., Trent University, University of Manitoba). Most universities offer a mix of all these types of funding and cover specific costs on top of that (e.g., printing, storage, etc.).

While in many cases there are strict restrictions on what these funds can be used for (e.g., Wilfrid Laurier University's 'finances guide' for clubs), and there are often impressive financial accountability requirements (e.g., University of British Columbia), in many cases using these funds to work with external organizations or at least to work for a common cause is allowed. In some cases, the involvement of external NPOs is even required (e.g., McGill University Student Union's Charity fund).

Third, with regard to recruitment benefits, the above-mentioned fact that clubs are meant to be as autonomous as possible is, in my experience, one of the chief advantages of starting a campus club versus simply recruiting volunteers on campus. When an NPO starts a campus club, it is essentially planting a stake in the ground. The club leaders continue to be a constant source of recruitment and attraction for other volunteers. What's more, when the NPO with a club needs volunteers on campus, it has an immediate pool of volunteers who have already demonstrated an interest and will likely know more about the NPO's work.

Engaging students through campus clubs also has consequences for leadership development. I have volunteered for a number of different organizations and was happy to do many simple and complex tasks from filling envelopes to online outreach. But as a campus club leader, I soon realized that the club's executive had to take the initiative if anything was going to get done. Rather than signing up for one or even many tasks, we were responsible for finding a way to get all tasks done either by delegation or doing it ourselves. In the process, we inevitably learned some valuable leadership and management skills. While I may have found all this difficult to handle sometimes, I never felt exploited because at the end of the day it was *my* club. It is that kind of motivation (a sense of identity and ownership) that explains why for many months over a few years I put in at least as many hours as a part-time job would require and why, even now after graduation, I still attend club events, give advice to new executives, and help out occasionally. What's more, the experience of being responsible for other people's work—by giving direction and training, but also by signing off on volunteer hours and giving reference letters—besides being empowering, offered me a profoundly new perspective on leadership, which has influenced how, as a graduate, I relate to my own supervisors and managers.

Both observational and academic research tends to confirm that club leadership would be a fulfilling and self-motivating experience under typical circumstances. According to such research, what drives people in general and the younger generation in particular to be passionate at work includes flexibility and autonomy (Andrews et al., 2013; Murray, 2015; Liu et al., 2011). Campus clubs offer student leaders a chance at flexibility and autonomy with fairly low stakes and the potential for relatively high return. Taken together, this makes for an impressive tool in the recruitment pipeline. It minimizes risk, yields an intrinsic, as opposed to deferred or purely administrative, return (since an NPO's campus club works towards the NPO's goals), and acts as a training vehicle all at once. These are very important benefits in a sector where (at least in Ontario) a lack of relevant experience has been reported as one of the biggest barriers to recruitment (McIsaac et al., 2013: p.21). There is significant "win-win" potential for both students and NPOs, most obviously in the areas of career opportunities for students and improved returns on limited investment in recruitment and training for NPOs.

3: What can NPOs do for clubs?

What a particular club needs most depends on its particular situation. Nonetheless, there are a few things that would likely be appreciated by any club and its student members, including active and ongoing engagement/communication, training and career opportunities, and signs of longer-term stability.

It should be stressed that supporting a campus club does not have to be costly or onerous on already over-burdened NPOs. Consider these simple gestures:

- Locate and schedule volunteer appreciation parties in public-transit-friendly places and not during exam times to ensure that campus club members are included in larger organizational opportunities.
- Keep club executives informed about organization-wide decisions through an occasional e-mail to engage them and ensure their efforts are well-aligned.
- Maintain two-way communications: keep clubs connected, show them that they're appreciated, and ask them if they need any support.

On a larger scale, consider the following suggestions:

- Explicitly integrate campus clubs into the NPO's employment pipeline as an effective way to provide clubs with a perk to offer potential club members.
- Offer training opportunities and resources in areas such as management, grant applications, etc., to give the club a welcome edge on campus and contribute to developing the NPO's own future workforce.
- Invite campus club leaders to attend the NPO's board meetings, if possible as voting members, not only to promote respect and engagement but also to provide a sense of permanency about the club's role in the NPO's future. Those who start and lead campus clubs always have good reason to wonder about where the club will be two years into the future.

In brief, an individual organization can support its club(s) through integration and stability. In turn this will improve the club's ability to achieve the NPO's goals on campus and will provide a pool of already-trained and familiar candidates for future NPO needs both on and off campus. This will no doubt give any NPO an edge in a time when anxiety over succession and generational transition abound.

Q: Where do we go from here?

There are a number of steps that could be taken at the sectoral level to catalyze and accelerate the growth of campus clubs for the benefit of the entire non-profit sector. A simple first step would be for a sector leader such as Imagine Canada to join with national student union organizations such as the Canadian Federation of Students and the Canadian Alliance of Student Associations, as well as the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, to formally recognize and celebrate the contribution of campus clubs to the non-profit sector. The result, I suspect, would be both an increased level of awareness by both students and NPOs of shared goals and interests, and momentum to build on with future local and national collaborations.

Another important step would be to develop the communication networks that will be vital to effect practical integration over time. Of particular importance are the 100 or so club coordinators, employed by student unions to oversee and support clubs, who are on campuses across Canada and are best placed to get messages out to campus clubs. Communicating opportunities for sectoral participation, such as annual conferences, workshops, or roundtables to these individuals will be the best way to reach and recruit ambitious campus club members who want to join broader sector activity. If key organizations take the initial step to add campus club coordinators to their contact lists and do things like offer student discounts for attending conferences, the groundwork will be laid for organic growth and integration.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, significant research needs to be undertaken, as there is currently almost no reliable literature on campus clubs either at the micro or macro level. Sector leaders could help fill this knowledge gap by organizing forums and other opportunities for NPOs and clubs to engage in dialogue between and amongst each other. If the sector accepts that campus clubs are part of it, then campus clubs should become of increased interest to the considerable number of researchers and academics who study civil society. Hopefully, they could help address the data collection challenges identified earlier in this article.

Conclusion

The practical implications of this analysis for NPOs, especially those close to a campus, seem clear. There are a number of *prima facie* reasons to begin the conversation about starting or collaborating with a campus club. For NPOs interested in more information on the resources available at their nearby campus, the first step will be visiting the student union website and perusing the 'clubs' section (while they vary in detail and quality there almost always is some information). It is also important that NPOs know that most student unions have one or more staff to coordinate club activity and those club coordinators will likely be a source of much useful information and many contacts.

The challenges before Canada's non-profit sector are great, but I believe the sector can significantly increase its capacity by tapping into the potential of campus clubs. Although data is limited, the potential of campus clubs is suggested by their sheer number, the varied funding and resources they receive from universities and student unions, and the large number of students they engage. There are

strong reasons to believe in the unique educational and recruitment value of clubs. Campus clubs are a unique means of addressing vital challenges that NPO and sector leaders consider to be high-priority issues: staff and volunteer recruitment; youth engagement; managing generational and technological change, etc.

More research on campus clubs is necessary and would be worthwhile. Whether it is by slightly altering current surveys, having and recording some conversations about clubs within and between organizations, learning from the experiences of clubs on questions like succession, or partnering with academics to better research clubs, there are many good reasons to continue this conversation for the benefit of the sector, students, and all Canadians.

References

Andrews, J., Williams, J., & Brown, J. (December 13, 2013). How to manage the millennials. *Future of Work*. PwC. Retrieved from: <http://www.pwc.com/gx/en/managing-tomorrows-people/future-of-work/managing-millennials.jhtml> [May 1, 2015]

Center for Post-Secondary Research. (March 23, 2007). 2006 Experimental items codebook student organizations and involvement. *University of Indiana*. Retrieved from: http://nsse.iub.edu/pdf/exp_items/NSSE%202006_Experimental_ORG%20Codebook.pdf [May 1, 2015]

Curtis, K. (July 2009). The impact of welfare state restructuring on the nonprofit and voluntary sector in Canada and the US – Summary of findings. Center for Community Research & Service, School of Urban Affairs & Public Policy, Newark, DE: University of Delaware. Retrieved from: <http://www.onestep.on.ca/CurtisCanadian.pdf> [July 20, 2015].

Davis, N. (2007). The other club scene. *Diverse: Issues in Higher Education*, 2007, 24(4), p.22-25.

Gellin, A. (2003). The effect of undergraduate student involvement on critical thinking: A meta-analysis of the literature 1991-2000. *Journal of College Student Development*, 44(6), p.746-62.

Harper, S. R., & Quaye, S. J. (2007). Student organizations as venues for black identity expression and development among African American male student leaders. *Journal of College Student Development*, 48(2), p.127-44.

Huang, Y.-R., & Chang, S.-M. (2004). Academic and co-curricular Involvement: Their relationship and the best combinations for student growth. *Journal of College Student Development*, 45(4): p.391-406.

Liu, D., Chen, X.-P., & Yao, X. (2011). From autonomy to creativity: A multilevel investigation of the mediating role of harmonious passion. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 96(2), p.294-309.

Luo, J., & Jamieson-Drake, D. (2009). A retrospective assessment of the educational benefits of interaction across racial boundaries." *Journal of College Student Development*, 50(1), p.67-86.

Maureen, T. (2007). Assessing quality experience and learning outcomes. *Quality Assurance in Education*, 15(1), p.61-76

McIsaac, E., Park, S., Toupin, L. (2013). Shaping the future: Leadership in Ontario's nonprofit labour force. *Mowat Centre NFP* September 2013. Retrieved from: <http://theonnc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2011/06/ONN-Mowat-Shaping-the-Future-Final-Report.October2013.pdf>

[May 1, 2015]

Murray, A. (March 2015). What millennials do and don't want from their employers. *Fortune*. Retrieved from: <http://fortune.com/2015/03/05/millennials-best-companies/> [May 1, 2015]

Statistics Canada. (2013). General social survey – Giving, volunteering and participating, 2013. Retrieved from: http://www23.statcan.gc.ca/imdb-bmdi/instrument/4430_Q1_V7-eng.htm [May 1, 2015]

Turcotte, M. (2015). Volunteering and charitable giving in Canada. Statistic Canada. Retrieved from: <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/89-652-x/89-652-x2015001-eng.pdf> [July 20, 2015]