

The Middle Won't Come to You

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Look around your Student Activities Office. Does not matter what type of school, location, or school size, you will probably see the same thing. The usual faces are gathered – your council officers, programming board members, student government officers, and graduate students. There is an eager young freshman making posters for an upcoming event. Looking around, you know most of their names, or at least, to what organization they belong. Some of these students are busy, but many are just hanging out. This is where they spend most afternoons, particularly when they are not eating or in class. Why do they congregate here?

They do it because other student leaders make up their social circle, and they linger (often with no specific purpose) because being around other super-involved student leaders is very validating. “I matter here. People get me.”

Since writing my book, *Motivating the Middle: Fighting Apathy in College Student Organizations* (Sullivan, 2011), I have had lots of time to think about the real source of student leadership frustrations. Top-third student leaders create many of their own problems, treating leadership as a reactive exercise instead of an active pursuit. They think they need to motivate the members of their groups, when in fact they need to simply start engaging them. Top-third student leaders get very comfortable thinking of themselves as “the leaders” and wishing everyone else in their organizations would step up.

It is great fun sitting around the Student Activities Office whining about how apathetic their members are while they create a comfort bubble that stops them from being the truly effective leaders they want to be. Imagine how much more effective they would be as leaders and how much more dynamic their organizations might be if they were out interacting with their members and actually solving problems. Student government officers could be out meeting the students they represent. Program board members could be listening to their fellow students about issues and events they really want. Fraternity and sorority members could be talking to potential members and mentoring new ones.

But, it is so much more fun to sit in the “Cool Kids Club” of the Student Activities Office spending time with those to which they most closely relate. “We're having office hours!” they say, perpetuating the silliest idea in the history of student leadership.

Unfortunately, many who work in Student Activities perpetuate this bad habit. We create a welcoming environment, encouraging student leaders to hang out, often with little or nothing to do. In a way, it validates our existence. Then, we fall into the trap of only advising the top-third, building them up as the saviors of our student organizations, while the actual members wander campus in search of meaningful involvement.

Then, we send them to programs like the Undergraduate Interfraternity Institute (UIFI) and fraternity leadership schools to commiserate with other top-third leaders. Instead of sending them “into the streets” to serve the community, I wonder if we might not be better off sending them “onto their campus” to interact with their average members.

It is time to start advising our student leaders to take a break from the ivory tower and to get out there and solve some issues! Go find your middle third members who do not seek you out during “office hours.” Seek solutions. Get to know the people who you purport to serve.

Incidentally, most student affairs professionals would do well to follow the same advice. Instead of spending your days in your office validating the same 20 student leaders, get out and go interact with the students who would never set foot in the Student Activities Office. Spend an afternoon at the Women's Center. Go to the Rec Center and meet a whole new group of students. Stand at the Info Desk in the Student Center and interact with students who wander by. Play video games for an hour in one of the fraternity houses.

The middle third will not come to you. You have to go to them. Like a politician walking neighborhoods during campaign season, you have to take yourself to the people, listen to them, and question the comfort of your isolated perspective. When you do find them, remember the average student in an organization is not the same as the ones who hang around your office seeking the next leadership opportunity. They are students with multiple priorities that *compete* with student involvement.

Ask them what they like best about their experiences with their groups. Do not challenge them to do more. Ask them about their relationships with other members and how they balance involvement with other obligations in their lives. Be a good listener and resist the temptation to urge them to do more.

When you resolve to stop enabling the worst habits of the top-third and start serving a broader segment of the "involved" students on your campus, you become a better role model for your top-third student leaders. Begin the conversations about how your student leaders can shape their organizations so they are better able to improve the lives and experiences of all members.

None of this happens when the best and the brightest kill time in the Student Activities Office staring at each other's Facebook pages.

References

Sullivan, T. J. (2011). *Motivating the middle: Fighting apathy in college student organizations*. Tucson, AZ: Wheatmark.