

Member Acquisition and Retention Model

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The authors propose a model that describes the process of acquiring and retaining new members in an established group or organization. The model also provides a means of analyzing processes and “tools” employed to attract and inform nonmembers. In addition, analysis of processes and tools can be used to optimize their effectiveness for the purposes of acquiring and retaining membership. The model may be employed to analyze a variety of situations where nonparticipating individuals become willing participants, increasing the likelihood of their becoming members.

Numerous studies addressing the impact of a college and its environment on the student population have greatly influenced the student affairs profession and the way in which services and activities are provided within today's institutions of higher education (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Included in this literature are several theories on the nature of student involvement and its impact on student retention (Astin, 1975; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1975, 1987), student development (Astin, 1975, 1983, 1985, 2001), and student growth or change (Pascarella, 1985). However, noticeably absent from the student affairs literature is a theory or model that addresses how students are drawn into, and later become involved during their col-

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lege years in, groups or activities comprising the cocurriculum. It is the intention of this article to describe such a model and to provide suggestions as to how its use could improve the college experience of current and future students.

A model is a tool “by which individuals order and organize experiences and observations” (Land, 2001, p. 382). As such, different perspectives of the same observed experiences could result in differing model developments. The model outlined in this article is based on the observations and experiences of the authors at four large research universities and two small liberal arts colleges. This type of model and model development follows the concept of a formal sociological model as defined by Land (2001).

The diversity on college and university campuses has never been greater than today. Students come from a multitude of socioeconomic, racial, ethnic, and academic backgrounds. The psychosocial, cognitive-structural, and typology theories currently promoted within the student affairs profession provide a framework from which student affairs professionals can gain a better understanding of student needs (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998). It is taken for granted that an understanding of these theories is a necessary foundation from which to mold a student development-oriented student affairs program (Bloland, Stamatakos, & Rogers, 1994).

As Winston, Bonney, Miller, and Dagley (1988) note higher education and, perhaps more specifically, student affairs “has responsibility for attending to the total development of its various student clients” (p. 73). These student development-oriented programs have historically focused on the cocurricular aspects of students’ lives in an effort to design programs and activities to promote social and educational growth for participating students. Over the years student affairs journals and professional conferences have been replete with examples of such activities. However, one of the continuing and unanswered criticisms has been that only a small percentage of students participate in such programs and activities. It has been for decades, and it remains today a challenge for student affairs professionals to increase the number of students that participate in the many developmental opportunities provided through the cocurriculum on campus. If, as Pascarella

and Terenzini (1991) state, “a change is likely to occur to the extent that the student becomes involved” (p. 51); and as Astin (1985) suggests, “a highly involved student . . . participates actively in student organizations . . .” (p. 134), then does it not follow that student affairs professionals would want to maximize the number of students becoming involved?

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In an effort to engage students in the college and university environment, student affairs professionals continue to encourage the creation of clubs and organizations (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Winston et al., 1988). The assumption is that when there are more opportunities for involvement and participation there will be a greater number of students who will take advantage of these opportunities, leading to higher levels of student satisfaction and greater student retention rates. It is also important to note that Astin (1985) suggests that the quality of the involvement plays an important role in student satisfaction. The model described below highlights how the quality of involvement might be improved by understanding how to attract and retain students to a particular formal organization.

For the purpose of this article, the focus is membership in formal groups/clubs (e.g., Greek letter organizations, academic and social theme clubs, and community organizations). A formal group or club is operationally defined as an organization having a constitution and bylaws establishing a purpose for the organization’s existence and operating procedures of the group as well as its leadership. Although the focus of this writing is on established formal organizations, the model also may be applicable to less formal groups and clubs.

Formal membership in an established group or club; and it is characterized by an individual, in accordance with set procedures or rituals, performing an act of declaration of willingness to abide by and further the values of the group or club (e.g., pledging, induction). The employment of oaths, rituals, cards, certificates, badges, uniforms, salutes, signals, colors, and more by the group or club serve as signifiers of one’s formal membership. For many formal groups or clubs

there may be the requirement of initiation fees and annual dues that, at least on an annual basis, requires the member to renew formal membership.

An initial observation of the phenomena of individuals joining organizations has a nonmember come in contact with an organization, become acquainted, and over some initial period of time convert to a member or not (see Figure 1). Upon further observation, experience, and analysis of the membership phenomena, there seemed to be four distinct phases or stages that individuals encountered: the first two stages as a nonmember and the remaining stages contingent on being a member (see Figure 2). Further observation and analysis of the behaviors of individuals and groups resulted in the development of the model.

Figure 1
Timeline reflecting period when affiliation is, most likely, zone of conversion. For members there will be periods when they consider maintaining affiliation or disaffiliating.

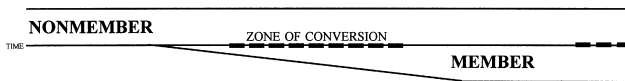
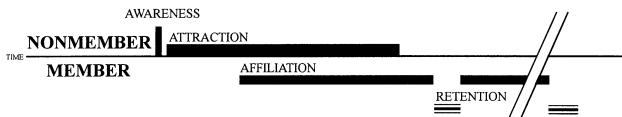


Figure 2
Timeline reflecting the four stages an individual progresses through in affiliating with a formal group. Affiliation and retention stages are repeated as long as an individual is required to "renew" their membership.

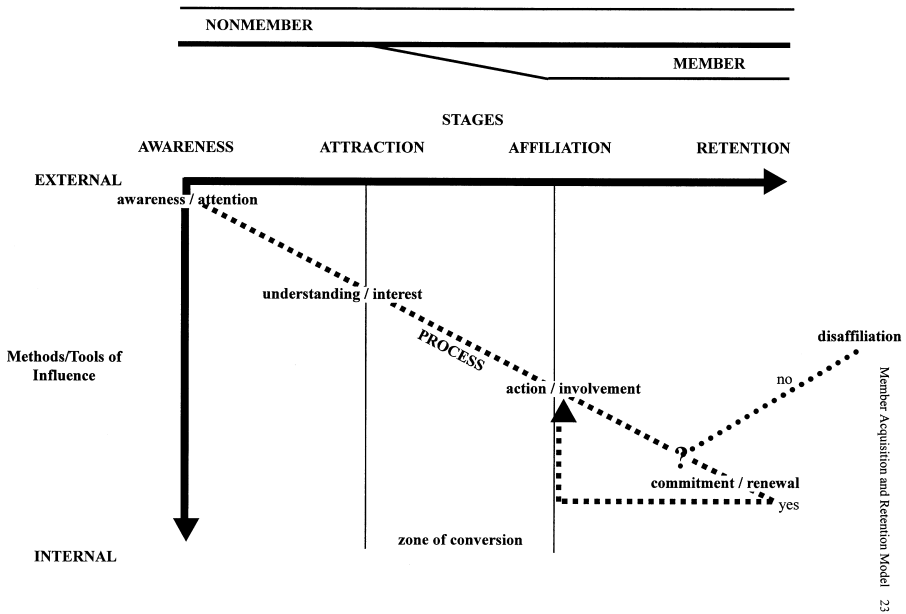


This model for building formal membership in a group or club posits four stages, each associated with a number of processes, through which an individual should attain information as well as experiences to formally become a member of an organization. This model demonstrates how nonmembers are converted to members as they pass through the four stages of awareness, attraction, affiliation, and retention over an unspecified time frame. These stages address how individuals come to join groups or in some cases establish groups; and through the retention of members, the groups can perpetuate themselves in the college environment. The processes encountered respectively in each stage of this model begin as external to the individual in the awareness stage (i.e., an individual must be made aware of the group before an interest and attraction in said group can be established) and remains so until she or he formally joins the organization in the affiliation stage (see Figure 3). Once the individual makes a declaration of intent to join the group, the processes that retain the individual become internal (e.g., motivation to participate, sense of belonging, feeling of group attachment, satisfaction and appreciation of one's involvement).

In becoming a member of an organization, an individual needs to first go through the stages of awareness and attraction. These early stages are characterized by first learning about the organization and then checking for a personal fit. If the organization offers an acceptable personal fit, the individual becomes a member (viz., the model's zone of conversion occurring between attraction and affiliation stages) and encounters the stages of affiliation and retention. Successful members continue in the affiliation and retention stages as long as they contribute to the group dynamic and the organization meets their participation needs.

Additionally, this model addresses the methods or tools that groups may use to connect with potential members and continue to engage current members. The model suggests that in the initial stages the methods or tools are external to the potential member, implying the need to employ more media-related tools such as the student newspaper, brochures, or flyers (see Table 1). However, the later stages of the model require methods or tools that focus more on the internal nature

Figure 3
Member Acquisition and Retention Model



(e.g., intrinsic rewards, affiliation needs, self-esteem) of the members or potential members. These tools may include group activities, personal contacts, organizational dynamics, and more (see Table 2).

Four Stages

Awareness

The first stage in this model is that of awareness—before a student can become a member of a group the individual must know that such a group exists. The student is in effect “unaware and unknowing” of the group. The key feature of the awareness stage is for the group to be noticed by a potential member. To be noticed, the group needs to be encountered a number of times in qualitatively different ways (e.g., observe members doing something, read an article in the student

Table 1
Influence Locus and the Concomitant
Method/Tool of Influence

Influence Locus	Method/Tool of Influence	
External	indirect	pre-existing interest (sport, hobby, etc.) passive observation media brochures word-of-mouth observing group & members
	direct	participating with group & members engaging with a member
		identifying with group part of the group/effectuated by group dynamic influencing group dynamic
Internal		personal value personal stake/identity satisfaction psychosocial wants and needs

A variety of methods or tools may be employed to influence an individual to become a member of a formal group. Initial influence is from methods or tools external and indirect to the individual. As the individual begins to consider becoming a member, the influence to join shifts to be external and direct, no longer a passive observer of the group but a limited participant. Once a member, the influence to stay a member shifts to an internal locus based upon satisfaction, fulfillment, recognition, identity.

Table 2
Key Features of Each Stage of the Process of Affiliating With a Formal Group

Stage	Process	Information	Contact	Participation
Awareness	Awareness Attention	perceived info	indirect member contact	no participation
Attraction	Interest Understanding	external info	direct member contact	limited participation
Affiliation	Action Involvement	actual info	direct member contact	full participation
Retention	Commitment Renewal Disaffiliation	actual info	direct member contact no member contact	full participation no participation

Different processes are occurring in each stage. The processes expose the individual to different types of information about the group, whether there is direct contact and interaction with group members, and the degree of participation they may have with the group.

newspaper, see an announcement flyer for a meeting or sponsored event). The potential member is a passive observer and receiver at this stage, and the more direct and indirect encounters this student has with the group the greater the opportunity for a curiosity or interest to be developed. Groups seeking members will be actively on display conducting activities as an identifiable group. At many universities this takes place through activity fairs at the beginning of the academic year in which formal groups are provided an opportunity to display information in an effort to market the club and recruit new members.

The processes at work in this stage are awareness and attention (external to the individual) of the potential members being raised to the point of first being familiar with the existence of the organization. A shift from simply being aware of the existence of the organization to a student being attentive to details when mentioned shows that an interest in the organization is developing. As the organization is repeatedly encountered, its perceived reputation is encountered and becomes known to the potential members. If individual members are encountered they are often viewed as representing the organization and, therefore, the reputation of each individual encountered becomes associated with the organization and is viewed as part of the reputation of the organization. If the potential members value the reputation and activities, and see people similar to themselves in the organization, they will begin to pay even more attention to this organization. At some point the potential members look for those in the group that seem to be like themselves or someone to whom they might aspire. As they begin to identify with the group's membership, potential members will seek out more information about the group and try to be noticed by the group or spend time with the group or its members if there are opportunities to do so. It is this interaction that allows the potential members to enter into the attraction stage.

Attraction

In the attraction stage, the potential members need more detailed factual information about the group or organization. In addition, the potential members shift from being passive observers to being partial participants (invited to participate in selected activities of the organization). The student is now "aware" of the group but "unknowing" of the group's informational details (e.g., history, values, operations). The

processes at this stage focus on building one's interest and obtaining a greater understanding about the organization. Understanding is developed in terms of the individual personally confirming the publicly perceived reputation of the group and its espoused values. As an opportunity for limited participation in the organization's activities, members of the organization at this stage become available as possible friends to the potential member. It is also at this point when potential members ask the questions "Do I fit in?" and "Are these people with whom I would like to be associated?"

In his seminal piece on group interaction, the sociologist George Homans (1950) posits that activities and interactions imposed by an external environment (i.e., an organization) arouse certain sentiments among the people toward each other and the organization. Furthermore, Homans describes a mutually dependent relationship between the factors of activities, interactions, and sentiments, where a change in any one of these factors will produce a change in the other two. Of particular interest is the postulated relationship between interaction and sentiments, and the implications for the processes of the attraction and the affiliation stages of the Member Acquisition and Retention Model.

Based upon Homans' (1950) initial hypotheses, "persons who interact frequently with one another tend to like one another" (p. 111); he puts forth the more dynamic and useful reformulation of his hypothesis, "the higher the rate of the interaction of two or more people, the more positive will be their sentiments toward each other and vice versa" (p. 112). The impact on the group in terms of "identity and reputation" is a form of standardization arising from member interactions. According to Homans (1950), "the more frequently persons interact with one another, the more alike in some respects both their activities and their sentiments tend to become" (p. 120). High rates of interaction and positive sentiments toward another are necessary to establish a friendship.

With the development of a single friendship between an existing member and a potential member, the potential member "tries on" the reputation and values of the organization (e.g., feeling "gung ho" about the group, expressing desires for affiliation or membership in the group, or possessing aspirations in the context of being a group

member). Oftentimes, when a friendship has developed between a current member and a potential member, the potential member will accept the values of the friend and, therefore by association, the values of the organization. At this point the potential member may be offered an invitation to join and formally become a member, or she or he may simply express a desire to join. Upon entering into the application process (e.g., pledging, interviewing) or becoming a member, the individual enters the affiliation stage.

Affiliation

In the affiliation stage the new member will receive a more formal education about the organization and its history, values, and vision. The awareness of values is now transformed into an expression of the shared values of the group by the new member. The student as a new and formally indoctrinated member (e.g., new member education program, pledge period, probationary status) is now “aware and knowing” of the group. The processes at this stage require action and involvement. The Homans Model also has important implications in the affiliation stage. The factors of activities and sentiments have a strong relationship that can impact affiliation. As a member, participation in valued, enjoyable activities increases positive sentiment toward the organization; and the more valued or enjoyable the activity, the more positive the sentiment toward the organization. When the organization is unable to provide valued activities or positive interactions, sentiment toward the organization will be adversely affected.

Participation and contribution to the group dynamic results in the nature of group activities and values expressed. At this stage one’s reputation may become confounded with the organization’s and personal stake issues become important. Members will vacillate between the affiliation and retention stages of this model.

Retention

Staying with the organization is dependent upon the personal stake individuals have in the group and the personal benefits they receive (viz., internal processes). In many formal groups annual dues or membership fees cause members to reflect upon their affiliation with the group. When it has been satisfying in terms of activities and when the individuals’ needs are being met, their commitment will continue and they will renew their membership. The retention stage is concentrat-

ed on the individual members in terms of their commitment and willingness to renew. Commitment is dependent upon the personal needs of the individual having been met by their participation within the group.

Hence, individuals whose needs are being met will continue their commitment to the organization and remain members. Those who believe their values, personal goals, or interests no longer coincide with the organization's will not renew their commitment to membership and will disaffiliate with the organization.

Discussion

In this model, as individuals proceed through the awareness and attraction stages, they develop a psychological contract (viz., a unilateral expectation or set of expectations that are unexpressed and unknown to the organization and its members) towards the organization and its members. As members in the organization make the potential members knowledgeable about its history and functioning in a formal contract sense (viz., an explicit expectation established, expressed and known to both parties), the potential members formulate expectations and establish a psychological contract for themselves. For example, an individual's psychological contract might include the following concepts: the organization should not interfere with my academic work, the organization will not have me do anything illegal or improper, I will be treated respectfully by other members, I have a say in what the organization does, and so on.

The psychological contract becomes critical to the individuals in the affiliation stage where they are active and involved in the organization. As the individuals participate as members, they are continually validating their psychological contract. As long as the organization and its other members function according to the psychological contract, the individuals will maintain affiliation. If the organization or one or more of its members violates this psychological contract, as a part of renegotiating the psychological contract the individuals may then reexamine their commitment to the organization, their commitment to other individuals in the organization, and their need to maintain member-

ship (viz., desire to formally share values and reputation of the organization) in the retention stage of the model.

Psychological contracts are not static and may change over time as circumstances arise. For example, developing friendships and relationships outside of the organization or part-time employment may result in modifications of psychological contracts. A dating relationship outside of the organization may not only create additional demands but also can often cause a member's psychological contract to be modified (i.e., the organization should allow one to have time to pursue a relationship). Additionally, a member who takes on the responsibility of a job or additional outside commitment may now begin to miss a significant number of the organization's meetings.

In the normal passage of time, members are required to consider their commitment and willingness to remain members in the retention stage by renewing their membership and paying dues on an annual basis. The retention stage may also be brought on at any time by a perceived violation of one's psychological contract by the organization or its members.

Additionally, this model is consistent with the following conformity and socialization stages described by Kelman (1958) in social psychology literature: compliance, identification, and internalization. These are stages whereby an individual goes along with a group (compliance), desires to be like members of the group (identification), and finally acts like and believes like a member of the group (internalization). Conformity and socialization models describe the process of conforming by an individual. These models do not identify processes or tools employed by groups to facilitate joining (viz., interactions between organizations and individuals that result in organizational membership).

Implications for Practice

Student retention on college and university campuses continues to remain a concern, and student involvement in extracurricular activities has been well documented as having a positive relationship with

student persistence (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). The understanding of how to increase the number of students participating in extracurricular activities can have a direct impact on student retention. Therefore, we believe the Member Acquisition and Retention Model has several implications for student affairs professionals. Three of those implications became immediately evident to us as we developed this model: (1) how organizations must function (develop tools and processes) to gain and retain members, (2) how advisors can best help organizations (employ tools and processes), and (3) how the model can be applied to informal groups.

As groups or organizations attempt to attract new members and retain current ones, it becomes important for them to understand the differences in the informational needs of the individuals who they seek to attract or retain. For example, groups must be careful what information is provided to potential members and what methods are used to convey this information. Too much detail in the early stages (attention and attraction) may inadvertently cause potential members to lose interest in pursuing membership. The information provided at these stages is external to the prospective members and should attract attention to the organization and generate interest. The group should try to generate questions, not try to answer the questions before they are asked. During the affiliation stage, when a group is supposed to have members active and involved, if there is not a sufficient amount of activity or inappropriate activities, member satisfaction will suffer and retention will be negatively affected.

Advisors can play a crucial role in the development and continuation of a group by using the concepts presented in this model. For example, at a meeting of new members, the current officers may run through an agenda asking people to volunteer for activities that these new members are hearing about for the first time. There may be little enthusiasm for these activities because the new members need additional information about the activities. The model indicates that these new members need to have an understanding of what the activities actually involve in terms of time and skill level, an ability to see themselves as being successful in the activity, and information about the activities the group has completed in the recent past. Additionally, advisors are in a position to assist organizations in focusing on member involvement in activities and how the organization can maximize

the internal needs of members. This can also be of assistance to the organization as it strives to avoid dysfunctional group dynamics (viz., Groupthink, Abilene Paradox, “mob” behavior).

The extension of the model to informal groups can also be very important on college and university campuses. When observing people playing Frisbee or hacky sack on campus, it may be noted that individuals become involved through much the same process as they do when becoming a member of a formal group. Individuals becomes aware that a group exists (awareness), they approach the group (attraction) and hang on the periphery waiting to be invited to participate or they will ask to join in, and then as they participate they can interact with and get to know others in the group (affiliation). Participation may lead to acquaintance and familiarity with another in the group. Retention may be said to be achieved when at subsequent times the group reforms for the activity again and the same individuals are together for the activity, or members of the group establish a time together to engage in the activity. It is often through these informal group gatherings that the more formal campus organizations are born. Understanding this model may facilitate the development of more organizations that are in a better position to prosper.

Summary

Kenneth Land (2001) states that “a formal sociological model is a way of representing aspects of social phenomena within the framework of a formal apparatus that provides us with a means for exploring the properties of life mirrored in the model” (p. 383). According to the model presented, there are distinct stages through which an individual progresses to become a formal member of an established organization. Tools and processes employed at each stage facilitate informational and experiential needs of the individual. Initial tools and processes are external to the individual in the first two stages of the model: awareness and attraction. A mismatch of tools and processes will decrease the probability of attracting, attaining, and retaining members. For example, employing action and involvement processes before the individual is at the awareness stage will deter the individual from becoming a member. Action and involvement processes require greater knowledge about the organization than an individual

would have at the awareness stage. A potential member would not comprehend the activity in the same way as a member who has gone through education about the organization in the affiliation stage and, therefore, would be more inclined not to pursue affiliation.

The last two stages—affiliation and retention—are cyclical. Individuals in the affiliation stage are engaged in processes of action and involvement as members. Periodically, they enter the stage of retention and will reconsider their status as members of the organization at which time they engage in a process to determine their level of commitment and whether to renew their membership. Renewal in the retention stage returns the members to the processes of the affiliation stage. If at the retention stage, the organization, its activities, and its reputation change adversely in the perception of the members; commitment will wane; and there will be no renewal of membership. This is the point at which disaffiliation occurs. However, if the meaningfulness of the organization has become internalized in the members, they view their participation in the organizational dynamics, and they view the group's reputation as a reflection of themselves, then renewal will occur and the members will continue their involvement with the group.

Organizations can develop and retain members who will maintain and expand the membership by employing the right tools and engaging in appropriate processes at each stage as depicted in the Member Acquisition and Retention Model.

Advisors with an understanding of the model can provide assistance to their student groups to not only become more successful in attracting members, but also guide groups to engage in activities that benefit the membership and retain active members.

Recommendations for Further Research

Astin (1985) postulated that “students learn by becoming involved” (p. 133). Student affairs professionals are often viewed as the custodians of the cocurriculum and, therefore, can greatly assist groups in developing their membership through helping groups develop appropriate tools and processes to gain and retain members. Further

research of this model is needed in order to develop a method that will permit practitioners to assess the stage a particular individual is at and thus select the appropriate tools and processes to entice that individual to affiliate and become involved with a given organization. There is also an opportunity to research the connections between this model and marketing models, such as the social marketing model outlined by Martin, Herie, Turner, and Cunningham (1998) or the services marketing model as described by Hoffman (2000).

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