Extracurricular engagement and meaning in life for undergraduates: Importance of meaningful activities
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Research Questions
What is the relationship between students’ participation in extracurricular activities and their sense of meaning in life? Is this relationship direct or indirect?

Background
• Meaning in life is a crucial component of wellbeing, and identifying the aspects of life that enhance it is an important endeavor (Roepke, Jayawickreme, & Riffle, 2014; Ryff & Singer, 1998; Steger, Oishi, & Kashdan, 2009)
• For undergraduate students, presence of meaning is associated with lower rates of alcohol use (Schnetzer et al., 2013), gains in wisdom, positive self-development (Webster et al, 2018).
• Engaging in meaningful activity contributes to fulfillment of students’ psychological needs and sense of meaning in life (Eakman, 2014)

Methods
Sample
6291 undergraduate students from 16 colleges and universities
• 68% Female, 1% Other
• 0.4% American Indian/Alaska Native, 11% Asian, 6% Black/African American, 7% Hispanic/Latino, 0.1% Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, 70% White, 5% 2 or more races
• Mean age = 20.26
• 242 participants excluded due to missing data

Meaning:
The Wellbeing Assessment is a self-report measure of undergraduate wellbeing, including dimensions like meaning, extracurricular engagement, purpose, academic engagement, belonging, friendships, mood, positive attitudes, and subjective wellbeing.

For this study, we looked at...
• Meaning: Three 6-point, Likert-type items indicating agreement with statements like “My life feels meaningful to me”
• Engagement: 1 multi-select item indicating involvement in types of activities (e.g., Intramurals, fraternity/sorority, performing arts, etc.) & 1 Likert-type item indicating agreement with statement “I am involved in at least one extracurricular activity that I find meaningful”

Procedure
• Students invited by email to complete Wellbeing Assessment in an online survey in 2018 spring semester. (Participation incentives varied by institution)
• Data rake-weighted to NCES 2016 national demographics
• Analyzed using MIMIC models in Mplus software version 8.1. Used multi-step process that first tested measurement models (Kline, 2015).

Results
• Participation in at least one meaningful extracurricular activity is associated with students’ overall sense of meaning in life (standardized coefficient = .33; Figure 1).
• Varied strengths in path coefficients between activity types and activity meaningfulness (coefficients = .02 -.22; Fig. 1)
• Club/intramural (.20), varsity sports (.22), and fraternity/sorority (.19) showed strongest associations (Fig. 1)
• “Others” included political groups, media groups, and student govt. (coefficients ≤ .1; Fig. 1)

Discussion
• Students’ overall sense of meaning is not determined by type of activities. Rather, it is a function of the fit between a student’s sense of meaning and the activity.

Implications for undergraduate student programming:
• Offering or encouraging involvement in more types of programs is not necessarily better for students’ sense of meaning
• It is more important to understand what makes activities and programs meaningful for students (e.g., what makes activities a good fit for students’ needs, interests and values) and program accordingly

References