Proliferation of Campus Clubs: Too Much of a Good Thing?

Students value having a group for every interest, but some educators see more Balkanization

BY LEO REISBERG

CHARLOTTESVILLE, VA.

JUST DAYS after arriving at the University of Virginia for orientation, the new batch of freshmen ambled through a crowded outdoor field, where they faced one of their first tests in college decision-making: the student-activities fair.

A woman twirling a Hula-Hoop announced a 44-hour dance marathon. A student wearing an X-Files T-shirt hawked the Psi Phi Club, a group of science-fiction buffs that he aptly dubbed “the unfraternity.” And in the middle of one row of tables, wedged between the University Christian Fellowship and the University Democrats, sat the founders and only two members of the University Crohn’s and Colitis Association.

One unwitting freshman wandered to that table, signed the group’s mailing list, and only then asked, “What’s it about?”

Greg Guignard (who has Crohn’s disease) and Emmett Lynskey (who has ulcerative colitis) explained that the club, which started last spring, is a campus offshoot of a national organization for people with gastrointestinal disorders. One of their goals, Mr. Guignard told him, is to form a support group for other students...
acknowledged that some students and alumni were saddened.

"The immediate reaction has been that we know this is best for the college," Sister Eiser said. "The students are very positively disposed to this, because there have been men on campus for some time."

The change in admissions policy, which goes into effect next year, comes at a time when Emmanuel is trying to expand its academic presence in Boston. This fall, the college admitted its largest undergraduate class in a decade. And the chairman of the Board of Trustees, C. Michael Daly, noted in a written statement that the college was planning to build a research and development facility on the campus through a partnership with Merck and Company, the pharmaceutical giant.

A dying breed?

But possibly the larger issue in the college's decision, according to Sister Eiser, was the declining number of female students enrolling at all-female institutions.

Surveys by the College Board indicate that less than 15 percent of high-school seniors would even consider applying to a single-sex college. That may help explain the students' mostly positive reaction.

Sister Eiser said that after she announced the decision to them, the room burst into applause.

"We did have some tears," she noted. "We expected people to be sad, because it's a pride. But I'm pleased with how we listened to each other and the respect the students gave each other."

She also said the arrival of male students wouldn't change the mission of the college.

"We know that many things about Emmanuel will stay the same," she said. "But this is a decision that we did not come to lightly."

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The freshman responded by nodding his head blankly. "Oh, um, ok," he said, his eyes darting around toward other booths. Then he walked away, in search of groups that might better fit his interests.

SOMETHING FOR EVERYONE

With more than 250 groups recruiting at the activities fair, there was something for just about everyone: hip-hop fans, origami enthusiasts, stand-up comics, Christians who are athletes, Christians who are nurses, and international students from Hong Kong.

Student organizations are mushrooming at campuses across the country. Clubs are being formed for every type of hobby, sport, religion, or ethnic group. Smaller groups are breaking off from larger ones. General-interest groups are becoming more specialized. And some groups are simply being duplicated.

At Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, for example, the number of student organizations has increased from about 90 in 1996-97 to more than 120 today. Among the newest groups are the Malaysian Students Association, the Iranian Students Association, and even a club for something called Brazilian Jujitsu, a Latin American martial art.

The number of clubs at Emory University has increased from 202 in 1997 to 281 last year. At Northwest Missouri State University, 25 new organizations have cropped up in the last two years. The College of New Jersey will have about 180 student groups this fall, up by 40 in the last two years. Salisbury State University adds about 10 new clubs a year, and the total is now up to about 100.

The proliferation of organizations, some observers say, is a sign that more students are becoming engaged in their campuses and that the student body is becoming increasingly diverse—ethnically, racially, religiously, culturally, and socially.

The growth is also the inevitable result of a generation of students who grew up on the Internet. At a time when it's easier than ever to find a national outlet for just about any student taste, Web hermits are selecting out campus groups as a way to find like-minded fellows.

But some observers worry that the division and multiplication of campus organi-
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