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**AN EXAMINATION OF COLLEGIATE EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES  
AND CAREER ASPIRATION LEVELS**

by  
Chelsey Ingram

A Thesis

Submitted to the  
Department of Psychology  
College of Science and Mathematics  
In partial fulfillment of the requirement  
For the degree of  
Master of Arts in School Psychology  
at  
Rowan University  
May 3, 2017

Thesis Chair: Roberta Dihoff, Ph.D.

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## **Dedications**

I dedicate this manuscript to my parents, Karen and Brett; my siblings, Jason and Emily; my boyfriend Zachary Storr; his parents, Michelle and Ernie; and my restaurant work staff, for their constant love and support.

## **Acknowledgment**

I would like to acknowledge my thesis chair, Dr. Roberta Dihoff, and her graduate assistant, Alicia Clendaniel, for their continuous support in the completion of this thesis.

## Abstract

Chelsey Ingram

AN EXAMINATION OF COLLEGIATE EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES AND  
CAREER ASPIRATION LEVELS

2016-17

Roberta Dihoff, Ph.D.

Master of Arts in School Psychology

This study aimed to evaluate the career aspiration levels of college students who participated in college-related extracurricular activities compared to students who did not participate in extracurricular activities. Additionally, this study compared each domain of extracurricular activities (e.g., athletics, the arts, service clubs, etc.) to determine which domain has the highest levels of aspirations. Survey responses provided a representation of participants' intended future career achievements and perceptions of participation in collegiate extracurricular activities. Data was collected from a sample of undergraduate students through online survey responses via Rowan University's SONA system. Bivariate correlation tests in SPSS for windows were utilized to identify any significant relationships among the variables. Literature on extracurricular activity participation and its relationship to higher career aspiration levels and other factors contributing to aspirations were explored.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

College plays an impactful role in the personal and professional development of young adults. It provides a well-rounded education and offers courses that benefit an individual's opportunity for improved and lucrative careers (Light & Strayer, 2004). Simultaneously, higher education institutions offer non-curriculum extracurricular activities, which too influence a student's development. The impact of extracurricular activity (ECA) participation on students' development has been widely examined in general education literature. Findings have consistently found that ECA participation is a determinant of academic performance, such as higher GPAs and lower high school dropout rates (Mahoney, Cairns & Farmer, 2003; Feldman & Matjasko, 2007; Lipscomb, 2007). Additionally, ECAs have shown to enhance skill sets (Hansen & Larson, 2007; Tieu, Prancer, and Pratt, 2010) and define personal identity (Wilcox, Winn & Fyvie-Gault, 2005; Eccles & Barber, 1999; Mahoney et al., 2003). However, little is known about the relationship between collegiate ECA participation and career-related aspiration levels among college students.

Aspirations, which refer to the highest level an individual expects to achieve, in young adults are significant for countless reasons. Students with aspirations are future-oriented in the way they think, dream and plan for the future and engage themselves in goal-directed behavior (Nurmi, 2004). Nurmi (2004) postulated that thoughts about future selves are important because they ultimately influence choices, decisions, and activities which in turn affect subsequent accomplishments. Aspirations serve as a motivational factor in many of students' future achievements in educational and occupational success

(Nurmi, 2004; McGaha & Fitzpatrick, 2010; Mahoney et al., 2003). A career aspiration is a path an individual wants his or her career to follow. Those who have high levels of career aspiration are more likely to establish challenging goals for their future, seek postsecondary school and attain promising careers as young adults compared to those who do not develop such goals (Hodis et al., 2015; Trice & McClellan, 1993).

The current study examined the connection between collegiate ECA engagement and students' levels of aspirations for their future career. The primary objective was to observe a relationship between participation status, those who participated versus those who did not, and occupational aspiration levels. The researcher hypothesized that those who participated in ECAs would possess higher aspiration levels compared to their non-extracurricular peers. The study had two other research questions. First, do certain ECAs (e.g., athletics, the arts, academic clubs, etc.) have higher aspiration levels compared to other ECA domains? In this hypothesis, the researcher argued that there would be a positive relationship between certain ECA domains and higher aspiration levels. Second, how do students perceive the importance of ECAs, particularly in reference to their future career? This research purpose will explore the reasons and motives behind a student's choice to participate or not participate in extracurricular activities and whether participation is driven by aspirations and/or desire to boost career obtainment.

The pursuance of this study is significant because of the apparent, positive effects ECAs and high-aspiration levels individually harvest within a student. Participation in ECAs have the power to promote interpersonal skills and personal initiative (Hansen & Larson, 2007; Nurmi, 2004) which lay the groundwork for achieving educational and occupational success. High-aspiration individuals may be influenced by current activities,

which in turn affect their future-oriented cognitions and behaviors toward educational and occupational attainment (Hodis et al., 2015). If ECAs mediate the association between aspirations and career development, professionals might want to consider the promotion of collegiate ECA engagement. For example, career counselors could inform students the importance of ECA participation as a good start into their professional lives. Additionally, college recruiters might emphasize the college's facilities, such as recreational areas, and pathways to aid the student in active college engagement. Moreover, it would be particularly useful to distinguish which type of ECA produces high levels of aspiration, so professionals can emphasize a focus on those specific ECAs. Finally, exploring the student's perception of the value of ECA will further expand the literature regarding the significance of active engagement.

## Chapter 2

### Literature Review

#### Impact of Extracurricular Activities on Aspiration Development

For the purpose of the study, collegiate extracurricular activities will be defined as outside of the classroom time and not part of the core curriculum. They are organized activities, typically student-led, and are affiliated to the college or university the student attends. ECAs are structured, challenging, and voluntary, which makes them an ideal framework for developing initiative and motivation. Most students participate in ECAs because they have a genuine interest in the activity (Thompson, Clark, Walker, & Whyatt, 2013). Those with an intrinsic interest in challenging tasks or activities are at an advantage for learning and acquiring new skills that can be used for future career purposes. Overtime, this process may generalize beyond the ECA setting. Thus, ECAs have the potential to instill desires and motivation in students, as well as set ambitious goals for their future, including those pertaining to education and career objectives (Mahoney et al., 2003). Furthermore, future intrinsic goal-framing has been shown to predict long-term persistence and better performance (Vansteenkiste, Matos, Lens, & Soenens, 2007).

Experience is key in developing professional skills, and ECAs provide occurrences for enriched learning experience that are not found in formal courses of study (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Gerber, 1996). They allow students to apply the knowledge that they have learned in other classes in more hands-on situations. Furthermore, ECA participation supplies numerous opportunities for social networking, therefore increasing one's own social capital (Gerber, 1996; Stuart, 2006). Creativity is another aspect that

could be increased through ECA involvement, which impacts leadership experiences, creative thinking and confidence (Cotter, Pretz & Kaufman, 2016). The more experience individuals gain, they more likely to develop increased self-knowledge, which further refines their aspirations. Particularly during the adolescence stage, adolescents engage in exploratory behaviors that build their sense of identity, providing information about the self that affects future plans (Eccles, Barber, Stone, & Hunt, 2003).

Individuals develop personal goals relevant to their future expectations, which motivate achievement. People develop “possible selves” or “personal projects”, which motivate future-oriented behaviors related to the preferred outcome (Nurmi, 2004). For instance, if a person plans to become the Chief Executive Officer of a software company, then she might engage in behaviors and cognitions related to this field. She might involve herself in ECAs that promote leadership and teambuilding skills, as well as academic clubs regarding computer systems. As previously mentioned, formulating thoughts regarding desired future selves ultimately influence choices, expectations, and activities, thereby affecting following accomplishments (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Nurmi, 2004).

### **Dynamics of Career Aspiration: Key Concepts and Theories**

**Achievement motivation.** Motivation is a key ingredient for successful functioning and goal attainment. Ryan and Deci (2000) researched the value of motivation in producing positive outcomes for high school and college students. The future educational and professional goals are key motivational resources in driving their achievement motivation (Lens, Simons & Dewitte, 2002). Achievement motivation, an important construct associated with career aspirations, is the need for achievement or the psychological drive to perform at a high level of competence. Those with achievement

motivation orient themselves toward objects or conditions that they do not currently possess. If the individual values those objects and conditions and wants to possess them, then he or she may be regarded as having achievement motive (Mangal 1986; Gregor & O'Brien, 2016; Lens et al., 2002). Gregor and O'Brien (2016) found moderate correlations between career aspiration and achievement motivation in a sample of female graduate students. By way of explanation, those who desire to be the very best in one's field is linked to the desire to accomplish something of value through high efforts directed to the targeted goal (Gregor & O'Brien, 2016).

**Personal initiative.** Personal initiative is defined as a proactive approach that results in an individual self-starting, working toward goals and tasks, and overcoming barriers that arise in pursuit of a goal or task (Fay & Frese, 2001). Organizations are interested in personal initiative because high self-reliance is associated with organizational and individual effectiveness (Frese, 1997). Larson, Hansen and Moneta (2006) examined the role of ECA engagement in promoting personal initiative, such as “setting personal goals, evaluating what is needed to attain goals, and then actively acquiring the abilities and resources to achieve goals” (Seow & Pan, 2014). Another study found ECAs were significantly connected to high interpersonal skills, educational status, and educational aspirations (Mahoney et al., 2003).

**Hope.** Valero, Hirschi and Strauss (2015) demonstrated that hope, an important subcomponent of career aspiration, is a critical resource for occupational pursuits and organizational behaviors. Furthermore, individual differences influence behavior via their influence on the following motivational states: autonomous goals, positive affective experience at work, and occupational self-efficacy beliefs. In other words, individuals

engage in behaviors based on a model comprising reason to, energized to, and can do motivation (Parker, Bindl & Strauss, 2010; Valero et al., 2015).

**Goal-setting theory.** A key theory behind what energizes aspirations is the goal-setting theory. Goal-setting theory (Locke & Latham, 1990) was developed to describe the mechanism behind motivation and task performance. Goals indicate and give direction to an individual about what needs to be done and how much effort is required. The willingness to work towards attainment of goal is main source of job motivation. Clear, particular and difficult goals are greater motivating factors and lead to greater output and better performance compared to easy, general and vague goals. Goals must be realistic and challenging in order to give the individual a feeling of pride and achievement when the goal is eventually obtained. The more challenging and meaningful the goal, the greater the reward is and more passion for achieving it is. The goal setting theory states certain eventualities such as increased self-efficacy and goal commitment. Thus, if an individual is committed to a goal, there is a positive linear relationship between goal difficulty and task performance. Overall, goal-setting leads to better performance by increasing motivation and efforts (Locke & Latham, 1990, 2006).

Goal-setting is associated to several behavioral and cognitive benefits and assisted by strong empirical research. Schunk (2001) evidenced that setting goals increases motivation and that goals affect subsequent behaviors. A plethora of other studies solidified this notion that setting goals leads to improved performance (Locke & Latham, 1990, 2006; Schunk, 2001; Förster & Souvignier, 2014). Goal-oriented individuals have the energizing function to direct attention and effort toward goal-relevant behaviors and away from irrelevant activities (Schunk, 2001). Additionally, the motivating-nature of



goals promote characteristics of autonomy, persistence and perseverance (Locke & Latham, 2006), as well as success through practical working steps (Wiseman, 2015). Hence, this motivational technique is conducive in helping students set goals to create a context in which students have choice over their future steps to their career, particularly through the use of ECA. Lastly, Boo (2012) studied a sample of Korean high school students and established that career goal engagement was positively associated with students' plans to develop more knowledge and skills of their vocational capability. Adhering to this logic, those who aspire to achieve within their careers are likely to demonstrate commitment and competence regarding career goals.

**Social cognitive career theory.** Derived from Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory, social cognitive career theory (Lent, Brown & Hackett, 1994) introduced self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goals as three intricately linked variables that "enable individuals to develop personal control over their career development process by affecting the growth of career interest and choice behaviors" (Sawitri, Creed & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2014). The theory is built on the premises that learning experiences and contextual variables are environmental factors to help formulate and actualize goals. It emphasizes an individual's belief system and cognitive processes that regular and moderate behaviors (Lent et al., 1994).

Self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, and goals are the building blocks of the social cognitive career theory. The theory's first component, self-efficacy refers to the extent or strength of one's belief in ability to complete tasks and reach goals. Self-efficacy is achieved when an individual performs, learns by example, interacts socially, and understands their feelings and attitudes in a learning experience. Second, outcome

expectations are the beliefs related to the positive or negative consequences of executing a particular behavior. They are derived from past experiences and the perceived results of these experiences. The third component are goals, which play a primary role in a person's behavior. They are guidelines and decisions that initiate a particular activity or future plan. Their subsequent behaviors are organized based on their previously set goals (Lent et al., 1994).

The goal-setting and social cognitive career theories are the basis for understanding the power aspiration serves in driving motivation and future goals into motion (Locke & Latham, 1990; Lent et al., 1994). The results of this research study will emphasize the important role of ECAs in facilitating educational and career aspirations in young adults. Aspirations levels can serve as a determinant for career development in young adults. The possession of greater aspiration levels is a key predictor for students wanting to pursue the most advanced degree, achieve a high-level position in their field (Hodis et al., 2015), gain employment, and enhance marketable skills (Clark, Marsden, Whyatt, Thompson, & Walker, 2015). Therefore, it is important to identify factors that might affect aspirations. The world needs individuals who are driven and want to make a change in the community. Colleges could view the results of this study as motivation to promote the diverse range of activities to its current students as well as potential students. Additionally, the public will gain knowledge from this study and potentially want to promote its own personal involvement in ECAs.

### **The Gravity of Extracurricular Activities in Career Employment**

Resume screening is a highly-selected method employers utilize in gaining a first impression of an applicant (Cole, Feild, Giles, & Harris, 2009). It provides a brief

description of the applicants' qualities, knowledge, skills, abilities, and other personal characteristics (Fugate, Kinicki & Ashforth, 2004). The employer compares these qualities to the required position, education credentials, job-related experiences, and non-job-related experiences (Cole et al., 2009). ECAs fall under non-job-related experiences, which are considered an innovative way for young graduate applicants to demonstrate their skills and abilities to organizations.

Literature has demonstrated that the learning experience derived from student ECA involvement is a valuable asset for future career purposes ((Kaufman & Gabler, 2004; Cole et al., 2009; Stuart, Lido, Morgan, Solomon, & May, 2011; Clark et al., 2015). ECAs such as voluntary work and college-related ECAs, particularly team sports and committees, are activities that distinguish recent graduates in the job market (Kaufman & Gabler, 2004; Stuart et al., 2011). Rubin, Bommer and Baldwin (2002) discoursed that those who participate in ECAs have higher reported levels of communication skills, personal initiative, and decision-making skills. Moreover, a study revealed that employers responded more positively to resumes containing ECAs and leadership positions within these activities. These graduates were more likely to be asked for an interview and receive more job offers compared to an individual with less ECA participation and leadership positions (Cole et al., 2007). Clark and colleagues (2015) ranked the most frequently mentioned ECAs, committee work, sports, paid work and volunteering were frequently mentioned ECAs that produced key qualities in skills important for employment. They explained that participation in these activities undoubtedly aided in their career preparation. Sixty-four percent of respondents believed

that ECAs helped them get their first job, while 57 percent said their ECAs helped them do their first job better (Clark et al., 2015).

Those with career aspirations are more likely to be employed and thus more appealing to the employer. The possession of high aspirations can possibly predict how an individual will succeed in their career. Employers find it more attractive the individuals who analyze their current situation, set goals, and then act on achieving them. Employers associate goal-driven, motivated individuals to those who can provide a future direction for their business, increase sales or productivity, and limit stress because of their reliability and dedication to objectives and tasks (Seow & Pan, 2014).

### **Specific Domains of Extracurricular Activities and Career Aspirations**

The ECA domains covered in the study include athletics, Greek-lettered organizations, volunteer or service-related clubs, the arts, academic clubs, multicultural clubs, and student government. Studies have evaluated the different domains of ECAs to determine if one domain is more beneficial or valuable to participate in compared to another (Eccles & Barber, 1999; McGaha & Fitzpatrick, 2010). The context behind this theory is that different activities will produce specific skill sets that impact an individual's personal development, career or educational pursuance, and/or confidence (Thompson et al., 2013). For instance, Kaufman and Gabler (2004) exposed music and dance, public service, team sports, and student government as activities that significantly improved students' probability of being accepted into college. Another study conducted by McGaha and Fitzpatrick (2010) documented that physical fitness engagement and volunteer work were positively associated with stronger aspirations. However, some findings indicate that not all ECAs are of benefit to a student's achievement (Black,

2002). For example, participation in student clubs and sport competitions were found to distract some students from their academic studies (Black, 2002), while Christensen, Fogarty and Wallace (2002) reported mixed results for the positive effects of ECA engagement on academic performance.

Certain ECA domains may promote greater aspirations in students due to the skills, knowledge, and abilities emphasized in the particular activity. The following subsections contain empirical research regarding each domain of ECA and its associated positive effects of participation. Some of the domains, such as volunteering and sports (Kaurman & Gabler, 2004; McGaha & Fitzpatrick, 2010; Clark et al., 2015; Astin, 1984, 1993), have clearer connections to boosting career aspirations compared to other domains, such as multicultural clubs or academic clubs. The lack of connection may be attributed to the scarce research.

**Athletics.** There is heavy researching illustrating the positive outcomes that sports activities provide for students. ECA's provide an idyllic environment for building character due to its achievement-oriented nature (Fejgin, 1994; Clark et al., 2015). Therefore, athletic activities and sports are likely to promote high achievers because of the students wanting to be successful and win competitions (Fejgin, 1994; Denault & Guay, 2017). Fejgin (1994) discovered that a greater internal locus of control, or the extent to which individuals feel they control their lives, resonated more often in students who participated in competitive sports compared to those who did not. The study attributed these results to students realizing their achievement in the athletic activity was dependent on individual effort experienced through both successes and failures (Fejin, 1994). Another study's findings declared that sports ECA participators most commonly

reported increased self-confidence, self-awareness, and interpersonal skills (Clark et al., 2015).

**Greek-lettered organizations.** According to research conducted by the National Panhellenic Conference and the North-American Interfraternity Conference (2014), a Gallup study of over 30,000 college graduates found that students there were a part of collegiate Greek life were more likely to thrive in their community well-being and engagement in work (Gallup Inc., 2014). Findings discussed the important values instilled in sororities and fraternities that ultimately impact a students' career development. Those who were interested in joining Greek life acknowledged the future networking connections and transferable skills that extend long after they graduate. Simultaneously, leadership and volunteerism opportunities are regularly provided to members (Astin, 1993). Career-focused activities are available to increase persistence (Astin, 1984) as well create numerous occasions for interaction with peers (Pike & Askew, 1990), which strengthen professional ties after graduation (Astin 1984, 1990; Pike & Askew, 1990; Gallup Inc., 2014).

**Volunteer or service-related clubs.** Volunteerism is frequently associated with a wide range of benefits, such as increased health and well-being, developing skills, and social integration (Piliavin & Siegl, 2007). For instance, a sample of undergraduate students who participated in volunteerism-related ECAs had higher levels of cognitive moral development (Last, Brown-Liburd & Porco, 2011), which is a characteristic associated with high aspirations (Lens et al., 2002). In a recent study, students who participated in volunteer-based ECAs most commonly reported the main effect of heightened interpersonal skills (Clark et al., 2015). The possession of notable

interpersonal abilities is a key skillset to succeed in creating aspirations (Mahoney et al., 2003; Hansen & Larson, 2007; Nurmi, 2004).

**The arts.** Those who participate in art, music, theatre or dance pursue these types of activities because they are driven by a strong passion. For example, students who engaged in artistic activities were found to have strong internal motives compared to other types of ECAs. (Barnett, 2006). In a more recent study, students who participated in art- and music-related ECAs reported the benefits of increased creativity, initiative, and flexibility (Clark et al., 2015). As previously mentioned, Cotter and colleagues (2016) described the link of ECA impacting creativity which in return increases their self-knowledge and creative thinking which further refines their aspirations.

**Academic clubs.** Nauta, Epperson, and Kahn (1998) found significant results among women in mathematics, science, and engineering majors with higher levels of career aspirations. Thus, academic clubs might house individuals with higher levels of aspiration. As a member of such organizations, meetings can provide members with information regarding their field-related job skills that can help better prepare the members for their future career (Nauta et al., 1998).

**Student government.** Campus government representatives and students who participate in student government uphold campus rules and facilitate communication between their peers and administration. Holding government positions is an extremely significant role that can enhance time management, communication, and leadership skills (Miles, 2011). The Career Aspiration Scale – Revised (2013) measures career aspirations within an individual, and a sub-measure within the scale looks for individuals with high leadership aspirations. Thus, if student government participant possesses high leadership

characteristics, it could be likely that he or she aspires to hold a leadership position within their career (Gregor & O'Brien, 2013).

**Multicultural clubs.** There is infrequent literature covering the positive effects of participation in multicultural clubs. Campus multicultural activities can help increase awareness and understanding of the world's cultures and one's own cultural identity. Research demonstrates that students feel more accepted through culture-related club activities that provide a sense of home, comfort and feelings of pride. The clubs may provide a link to the culture the student left by being able to share feelings and experiences, speak in their native tongue, and educate others of their culture. Furthermore, it was found that students who maintain their cultural identity as they become acculturated to the United States school system are more likely to be academically successful compared to students who struggle with their cultural identity (George, 2002).

### **Student Perception of Extracurricular Activity Involvement**

The rationale for this phase of the research was to understand the meanings behind the choices of students to participate or not participate in ECAs. Past research has examined how current and former students felt about their participation in ECAs and the value they placed on the activities beyond their study in higher education. The following research and data presented below illustrates how students felt about their non-core curriculum activities, why they made particular choices and what value these activities have in the wider world. Scarce research looked into the views of non-ECA participating students and their choices to not partake in collegiate activities.

Seow and Pan (2014) described three major theoretical frameworks to explain the impact of ECA participation on student academic performance. Consequently, the three



frameworks may be used to explain why students choose to participate or to not participate in collegiate ECAs. The earliest theory is the zero-sum framework derived from Coleman's (1961) study. It theorizes that ECA engagement has a negative effect on academic performance because students spend more time on their activities with less dedication toward their studies and academic preparation (Coleman, 1961). The current study presumes that non-ECA students acknowledge this logic, thus providing a solid reason behind their choice to disengage during their studies.

The following two frameworks coincide with students reasoning to participate in ECAs during academic achievement. Dissimilar to the zero-sum theory, the developmental framework is a widely-accepted theory to describe the positive effects of ECA engagement on academic performance. The indirect impact of ECAs result from the non-academic and social benefits, which in return boost students' academic performance (Marsh, 1992; Fejgin, 1994; Broh, 2002; Mahoney et al., 2003). Broh (2002) found that ECA participation helps students develop life skills through new experiences, such as strong work ethic, personal initiative and locus of control, which are consistent with aspiration development. This theory has the potential to explain why students may participate in ECAs in order to build a resume for future employment opportunities or to develop abilities and skills for their future. Additionally, ECA increased social status amongst students and increased social ties to the school thereby increasing social capital (Broh, 2002). Thus, the current study inferred students may choose to participate due to social reasons, such as joining to make friends and building social connections.

The third theoretical framework is the more recent threshold framework, which hypothesizes the positive effect ECAs have on academic outcomes but is limited to a

certain point before having adverse academic performance (Fredricks, 2012; Marsh, 1992; Marsh & Kleitman, 2002). The threshold framework theorizes that low to moderate participation levels of ECA can boost performance and dramatically drops at the highest participation levels (Marsh, 1992; Fredricks, 2012). Comparable to the zero-sum framework, Marsh (1992) and Thompson et al. (2013) attributed the decline in academic outcomes to the excessive time commitment which leaves students with little time to focus on studying and school work. Marsh and Kleitman (2002) argued that “the number of ECA, time spent on ECA, and total ECA participation has nonlinear effects on academic outcomes” (Seow & Pan, 2014). As such, the literature suggests that “quality over quantity” of involvement is more important than how many ECAs an individual participates in or how much extra time is devoted to the ECA. Thus, it encourages students to participate in activities that are of interest or value to the student, so that he or she remains dedicated to fewer ECAs in order to receive an in-depth and rewarding experience that increases future skills and abilities.

Archer and Yamashita (2003) note that “career aspirations are influenced by a student’s conceptualization of his or her abilities and preferences, and the perceived match between these and job requirements.” In other words, if an individual does not perceive a job to be realizable then he or she is unlikely to pursue that job (Archer & Yamashita, 2003). Therefore, it is important for ECAs to foster an environment for students to enhance their perceptions of their future career aspirations and gain confidence in their abilities and skills to achieve them.

Another theory, self-determination theory, provides further explanation of motives to why students participate in ECAs and confirms their own perceptions of

engagement. The self-determination theory of motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000) theorizes that individuals are driven by a need to grow and gain fulfillment. Consequently, they perform a particular action because it is enjoyable or interesting or because it may result in positive outcomes. The theory is recognizably applied to ECA engagement because students may perceive these activities as interesting, valuable for their future career, appropriate for building social connections, or relatable to their own passions. Mahoney and Cairns (1997) also confirmed that ECAs appeal to student interests through examining the positive connection to school created by participation in activities. They found that a wider selection of provided ECAs were associated with a stronger effect in increased meeting of interests and needs of students (Mahoney & Cairns, 1997).

The perceptions of ECAs relevance (or irrelevance) to their future career provides a unique vantage point of the importance of participation and its impact on personal development. Muldoon (2009) explored students' understandings of the value of ECAs, and the participants stated they valued their participation in ECAs positively in relations to terms of future employability. Aligned with the self-determination theory, the greatest motive for pursuing ECAs were due to a personal interest, then followed by meeting people and making friends, benefits to career, and financial reasons (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Thompson et al., 2013). Thompson and her colleagues (2013) further discovered that several students discussed the importance of being strategic in selecting ECAs, as well as to be mindful of the skill development that might develop from a particular ECA in relevance to career aspirations.

Research has also observed alumni's view of ECA participation value. Alumni who took part in a Stuart et al.'s (2011) retrospective survey regarding the impact of ECA

participation agreed that a lack of participation may hinder students in acquiring a full student experience. Alumni and employers from the same study placed value on social networking and group-based ECAs in progressing transferrable skills, self-confidence, and sense of well-being for their chosen careers (Stuart et al., 2011). In line with Stuart et al. (2011), Clark and his colleagues (2015) conducted a retrospective study amongst alumni and discovered that they reported qualities and skills were enhanced and developed through their ECA participation, particularly interpersonal and communication skills, self-confidence and self-awareness. The participants agreed that their participation in ECAs enhanced these career qualities and skills more often than their degree did. Furthermore, some stated that their initial participation in ECAs, particularly sport activities, were for purely social reasons and not employment-related. However, some also believed it was beneficial in the long-run for developing confidence and maturity that later aided in their job interviews (Clark et al., 2015).

### **Summary**

The literature provided a possible positive relationship between ECAs and high aspiration levels. Other studies have explored the varying ECA domains, and results remain unclear if there are links between a particular domain and high aspiration levels. Theories demonstrate the importance of individuals with high aspiration in a successful career because they are linked to high achievement motivation, personal initiative, hope, and goal-setting behaviors. The preparation of college students is necessary in procuring a job and developing a career post-graduation. Thus, researchers must further analyze each particular ECA in relation to occupational ambitions and goals, while educators can promote the awareness of activities that student can benefit the most from. The literature

covering this specific topic is either highly mixed or limited. A clearer understanding of the long-term impacts of collegiate ECA on future career aspirations is needed.

Therefore, the current study plans to expand on existing research.

## Chapter 3

### Methods

This study hypothesized that the college students who participated in ECAs will possess higher levels of aspiration toward their future career compared to those who did not participate. The variables used for this study included demographics, extracurricular information provided by the participant, and career aspiration scores. The researcher looked to explain the varying factors that aid in differing aspiration levels among undergraduate college students.

#### Sample

Participants were 55 college undergraduates (female 62%; male 38%) recruited from a large university on the northeast coast. The study was composed of 35 ECA participating students and 20 non-ECA participating students. Participants were between the ages of 18 and 26 years ( $M=19$ ,  $SD=1.55$ ), and were predominantly Caucasian (77%), Black or African American (12%), Asian (5%), Hispanic or Latino (2%), Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Island (2%), and other (2%). The sample's grade point average ranged from 1.00 to 4.00 ( $M=3.12$ ,  $SD=0.57$ ), and participants were 46% freshman, 29% sophomore, 9% juniors, 16% seniors. The academic majors the participants declared were representative of the university with a full range (e.g., law and justice, psychology, mathematics, marketing, education, political science, biology, undeclared, etc.). Three participants' responses were removed from the study due to incomplete survey responses.

#### Instrumentation

The current study adapted similar procedures from previous literature regarding collegiate ECA involvement that were effective and successful. Questions were formatted

from a range of dichotomous questions, contingency questions, and “Check all that apply” questions. The survey obtained demographic information, extracurricular activity information and participation status, and aspiration scores through the Career Aspiration Scale – Revised (Gregor & O’Brien, 2013). This design allowed participants to reflect on their own experiences with collegiate extracurricular activities and their aspirations for their future career.

**Demographic information.** Participants were asked to provide basic demographic information including their age, gender, year in school, marital status, race or ethnic origin, grade point average, academic major, and current living location (on- or off- campus).

**Collegiate extracurricular participation information.** Majority of prior research regarding ECAs utilized a mixed-method design, particularly through the administration of the questionnaire. Similar to previous studies, the current survey asked information regarding ECA participation status (e.g., “Are you currently involved in collegiate extracurricular activities?”), the type(s) of ECA the subject participates in (e.g., Athletics, Greek Life, or The Arts), duration of ECA engagement (e.g., “How often do you participate in extracurricular activities?”), and the student’s perceptions of the importance of ECA participation (e.g., “What prompts you to participate in ECAs” or “What prompts you to not participate in ECAs”) (Thompson et al., 2013; McGaha & Fitzpatrick, 2010; Stuart et al., 2011). There are three purposes for which the collegiate ECA participation questions were created. First, the primary reason was to screen for the students who participated in ECAs and separate them from those students who did not participate. Secondary, there was a main focus on students who participated in ECAs to

understand their selected ECA domain, motives behind participation, and whether a leadership position was held. The final goal was to comprehend the reasoning behind students who chose not to participate in ECA. All combined, a clear picture was created on the makeup of students who participated versus those who did not.

**Career aspiration scale.** Other studies regarding the topic of educational and career aspiration typically ask participants to complete a Likert scale, in which an aspiration score is produced (Hodis et al., 2015; Nurmi, 2004; Beal & Crockett, 2010). The final section of the electronic survey is to complete the pre-existing Career Aspiration Scale – Revised (Gregor & O’Brien, 2013). The scale asked participants to indicate their degree of agreement to the 24 items on a 5-point Likert scale (0= Not at all true of me, 1= Slightly true of me, 2= Moderately true of me, 3= Quite a bit true of me, 4= Very true of me). Gray and O’Brien (2007) conducted four studies that provided support for a valid and reliable measure of career aspiration when used with adolescent, college, and post-college samples of primarily Caucasian women. The original intention of creating the Career Aspiration Scale was to better understand women’s career development (Gray & O’Brien, 2007), but soon gained applicability across cultures (Kim, O’Brien, & Kim, 2015) and to the overall improvement of career counseling practice to help populations that are at risk for occupational underachievement (Gregor & O’Brien, 2013).

The scale compiled an aspiration score to reflect the goals and desires each student has set out to achieve for his or her future career. The instrument is intended to measure leadership, education and achievement aspirations. The leadership aspirations subscale measures the degree to which individuals aspire to a leadership position within



their career (e.g., “When I am established in my career, I would like to manage other employees”). The educational aspirations subscale refers to the degree to which individuals aspire to continue education or training within their career (e.g., “I will pursue additional training in my occupational area of interest”). Last, the achievement aspirations subscale measures the degree to which individuals aspire to achieve recognition within their career (e.g., “I want my work to have a lasting impact on my field”). To score the measure, negatively worded items were reverse coded, and then the total score of each subscale was summed. High scores reflected strong career aspirations. Ultimately, these scores were interpreted in relation to the responses in the demographic section and ECA section.

### **Procedure**

The convenience sample was composed of undergraduate students partaking in an electronic survey through the psychology subject pool at Rowan University. Students who participated were granted credit for their entry-level psychology course after participation. Participants were electronically informed and provided voluntary consent to the current study. They were assured of the intentions of the research, that there were no risks or discomforts associated with the survey and that their responses would be kept confidential. Following consent, participants were requested to complete basic demographic information. Then, participants were asked to carefully read the provided definition of a “collegiate extracurricular activity” and based their following responses according to the definition. The definition was to ensure they did not include activities or hobbies external to the university. In this section, participants’ answers were contingent on whether they participated in ECAs or not. If students answered “Yes” to ECA

participation, they were asked to complete Question 2 through Question 5. If students answered “No” to ECA participation, they were asked to disregard Questions 2 through 5 because they did not apply to their circumstances and only answered Question 6. The participants proceeded to complete the Career Aspiration Scale – Revised (Gregor & O’Brien, 2013), and they read through the directions which described how to use the 5-point Likert scale to rate the degree of agreement to each scale item. At the end of the survey, students were thanked for their participation and were granted credit for their completion.

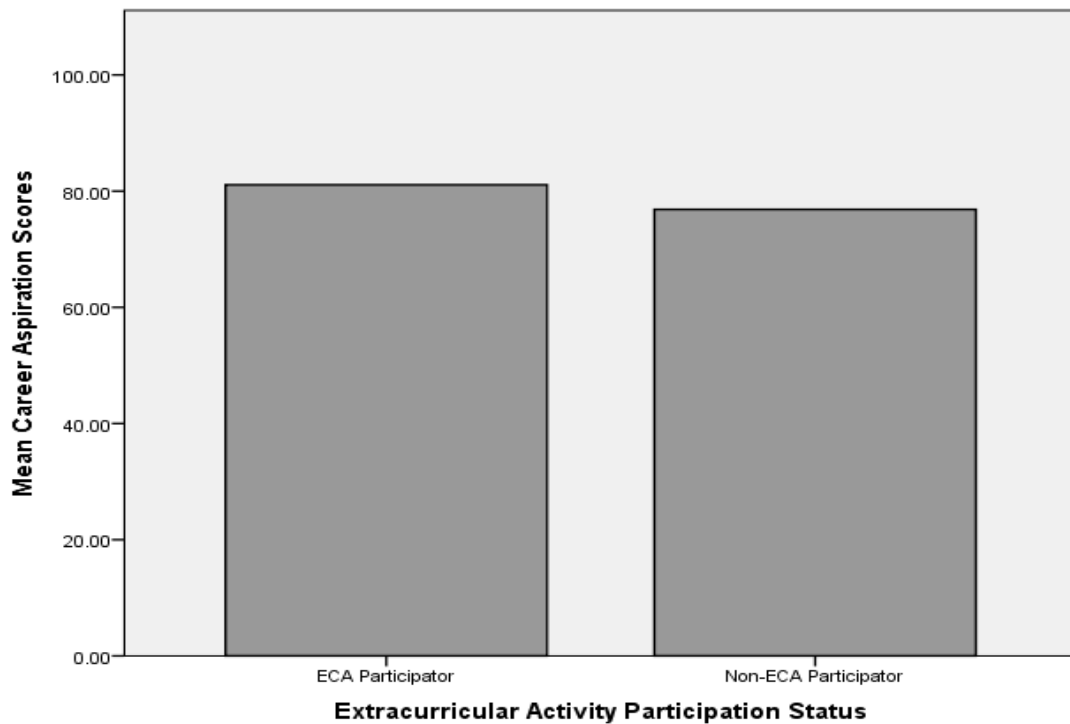
### **Statistical Analysis**

SPSS on Windows was used to analyze and code data. Correlational analyses were utilized to examine the empirical relationship between ECA participation status and their scores from the Career Aspiration Scale – Revised (Gregor & O’Brien, 2013). The bivariate analysis determined if there are higher aspirations of those who participate in ECAs versus those who do not. Descriptive statistics interpreted the relationship between particular domains and aspiration levels, as well as understood the main themes of why participants chose to engage in ECAs or not.

## Chapter 4

### Results

The first hypothesis addressed if there would be a significant relationship between a student's participation in ECAs and a higher aspiration score. The number of participants who participated in ECAs was 35, while there were 20 participants who did not engage in such activities. All 55 participants fully completed a career aspiration score. A bivariate correlation, two-tailed test of significance, determined the results were not significant  $r(53) = -.250, p=.066$  (See *Figure 1.*). With this data in mind it can be assumed that participation in ECAs did not influence higher career aspiration means in majority of the participants. Hence, the hypothesis that there is a relationship between ECA participation and career aspirations was disconfirmed.



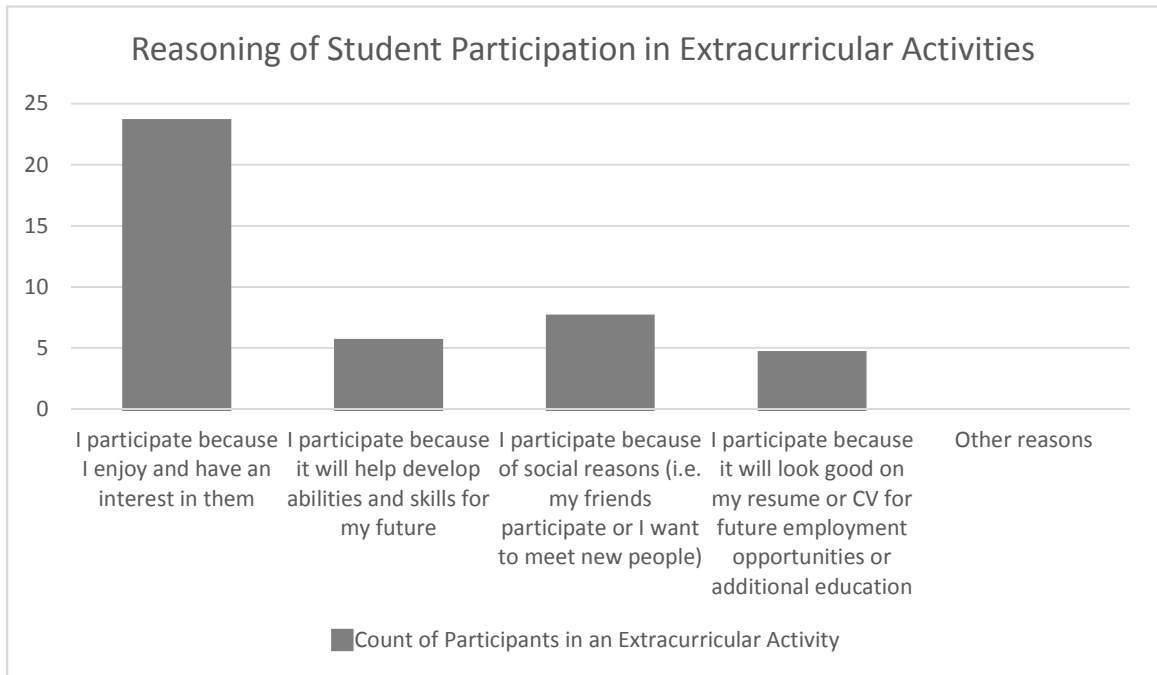
*Figure 1.* Comparison of career aspiration scores and extracurricular activity participation status

The second hypothesis measured whether particular ECA domains (e.g., athletics, student government, the arts, etc.) house students with higher career aspirations compared to other domains. However, the researcher did not have a large enough sample size to complete a statistical analysis to analyze individual activities. Instead, descriptive statistics acknowledged an interesting pattern amongst the 35 ECA-participating students. The top 40 percentile consisted of 12 participants with the highest aspiration levels, while the bottom 40 percentile was composed of 12 participants with the lowest aspiration levels. Roughly 8% of the top percentile participated in more than one activity. On the other hand, 50% of the bottom percentile participated in two or more activities. Of the 50% who engaged in multiple activities, six students participated in two or more activities, two students participated in three or more activities, and one student participated in four activities. This data suggests that the more activities a student participated in, the more likely he or she had a lower aspiration score.

The third hypothesis explored the foremost motives and/or reasoning behind student participation or non-participation in ECAs through descriptive statistics.

In *Figure 3.*, the main perceived view point of the student's participation varied across five different reasons. The vast majority (62.86%) of participants stated, "I participate because I enjoy and have an interest in them. 17.14% of participants agreed with the statement, "I participate because of social reasons (i.e. my friends participate or I want to make new people)." 11.43% of participants reported, "I participate because it will help develop abilities and skills for my future," and 8.57% agreed to "I participate because it will look good on my resume or curriculum vitae for future employment opportunities or additional education. No participants provided their own reasoning for

participation in ECAs. With this data in awareness, it can be assumed that the majority of participants accurately reported their current perception of participation. Thus, it is assumed they indirectly stated the importance of ECAs toward their future.



*Figure 2.* Totals of extracurricular activity participants organized by their main reason to participate in extracurricular activities.

According to *Figure 3.*, the main perceived opinion of the student’s avoidance of participation varied across six explanations. The slight majority (30%) of participants stated, “I do not participate because I have to focus on my schoolwork and extracurricular activities interfere with my studies”. 25% of participants reported, “I do not participate because I have no time due to work obligations,” whereas 15% agreed to, “I do not participate because I need personal downtime.” 10% of participants agreed to the

statement, “I do not participate because I have no interest,” and another 10% of the non-ECA sample agreed to, “I do not participate because the college I attend does not offer what I am interested in.” For the final 10% of participants, there were two alternative explanations of why they selected to not engage in activities. The first participant reported the lack of participation was due to being “Between school work and my job, it leaves very little time for extracurricular activities. The meeting times and days I am typically working.” The second participant stated “Other: I do not participate because...” “... I’m a new transfer student and still trying to acclimate to the school.” The data illustrates that the majority of non-participating students (65%) preferred to not participate because they needed to focus on their schoolwork and work obligations.

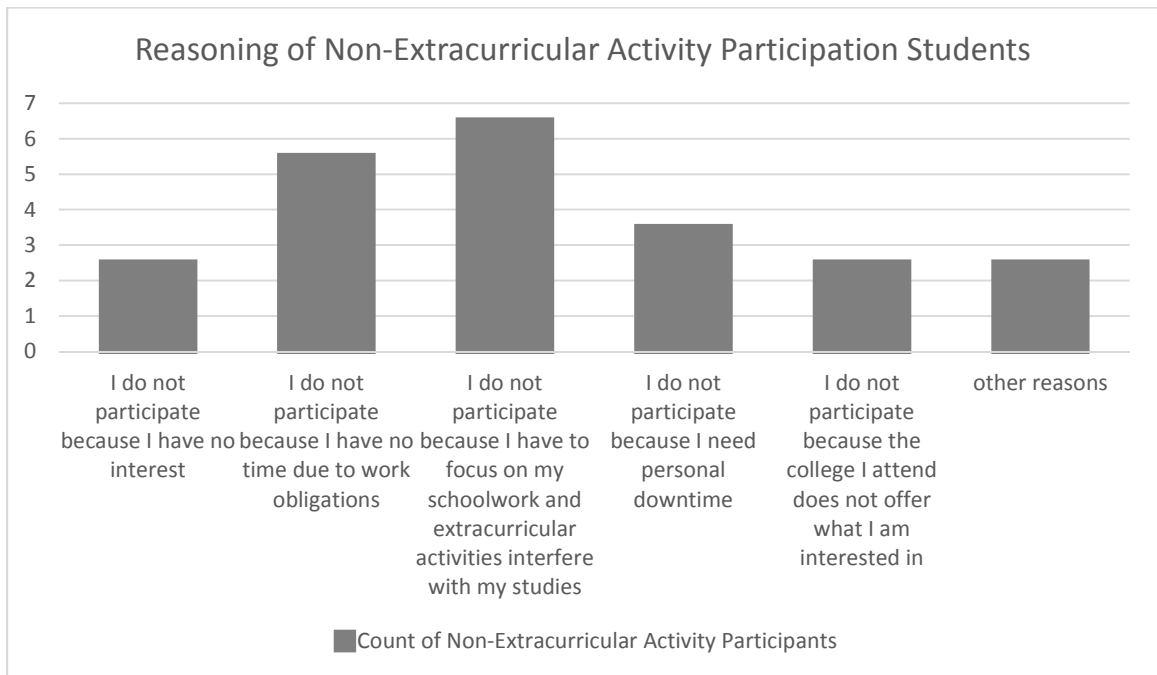


Figure 3. Totals of non-extracurricular activity participants organized by their main reason to not participate in extracurricular activities.

## Chapter 5

### Discussion

#### Summary

The current study examined the relationship between collegiate ECAs and career aspiration levels amongst college students. More specifically, the study analyzed the aspiration levels of participants through an online survey that requested their current ECA participation status and assessed their career aspirations for their future. The study expected to find higher aspiration levels in students who participated in ECAs, as well as certain ECA domains to possess individuals with higher aspirations. By identifying any statistically significant relationships in this study, it could be inferred that ECA participation is related to students' possession of higher career aspirations. Lastly, the present study explored the perceived choice of students deciding to partake in ECAs or not.

After computing the aspiration scores of both participating and non-ECA participating individuals, a bivariate correlation indicated there was no significant relationship between those who participated in ECAs and higher aspiration levels. From these results, it is inferred that there is not a relationship between active ECA engagement and higher career aspiration scores. Conversely, these insignificant results may suggest that all ECAs have the opportunity to impact a student's aspiration development. Literature provides strong consensus of the overall positive benefits of the general participation in ECAs (Mahoney et al., 2003; Hansen & Larson, 2007; Eccles & Barber, 1999; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Gerber, 1996; Cotter et al., 2016; Eccles et al., 2003). Thus, any ECA may promote varying positive qualities, such as high aspirations, or skill sets within students which can ultimately impact their future career.

Due to the small sample size, a statistical analysis could not be run to determine the significance level between certain ECAs and higher aspiration scores compared to other ECAs. Originally not intended to be examined, descriptive statistics discovered that those who participated in one to two ECAs were more likely to have higher aspiration scores compared to those who participated in two to four activities. In essence, those who participated in fewer activities had higher average career aspiration scores, while those who participated in two or more had lower average scores. Although they were moderate correlations, results agreed with the threshold framework in that quality of ECA is better than quantity of ECAs (Fredricks, 2012; Marsh & Kleitman, 2002; Marsh 1992). A reasonable assumption is that the more time a student places into varying ECAs, the less time the student has to dedicate to the other ECAs (which can boost abilities and skills for future career), schoolwork, proper socialization, and so forth. All of these factors influence the drive and goals of one's future. If an individual has his or her focus spread thin, then appropriate structure for a future will be negatively impacted.

The descriptive statistics of student's reasoning behind joining or avoiding ECAs was found to be interesting and informative. Most students joined extracurricular activities because they had a pure interest or enjoyment in the activity. This is consistent with Ryan and Deci's (2000) self-determination theory of motivation explaining that individuals select to participate because of their genuine interest in engagement. Furthermore, the current results coincided with past research produced by Thompson and colleagues (2013), which ranked the main reasons why students participated in ECAs. Their research identified and ranked the following motives of participation: personal interest, social reasons, and benefit to future career (Thompson et al., 2013). On the other



hand, majority of non-ECA students did not participate because their chief focus was on schoolwork and work obligations. These results are congruent to Coleman's (1961) zero-sum framework in which students acknowledge the possible disadvantage of ECA participation and its negative impact on school or work.

### **Implications**

Although there were no significant correlational relationships within the current study, its contribution to the academic literature world is significant. It emphasized a need for future researchers to understand the dynamics of career aspirations and harvesting it within students. The literature review suggests that encouraging goal-oriented behaviors, instilling motivation to achieve one's potential, and further developing career-related abilities and skills through ECA participation could be effective strategies in promoting career aspirations within students. Non-goal oriented students are at risk of missing out on their full potential because of their lack of motivation and career-related aspirations. In the long run, ECAs have shown to reap many benefits which can ultimately help fulfill students' interests and goals toward a career. Overall, it is important for educators and researchers to identify factors that might affect aspirations.

### **Limitations**

Despite contributing to the literature regarding the relationship between ECA participation and aspiration levels, there are limitations in generalizing the findings to other contexts and populations. First, the sample size was not large enough and data reported is correlation in nature. Participation collection was bound by using a singular subject pool provided by Rowan University. Second, the sample was drawn from one specific higher education institution, Rowan University, thereby limiting the

generalizability to other contexts and populations. The cultural aspects of South Jersey educational context might differ from other populations around the country. Third, potential response bias may have played a limiting role because the study may have attracted more ECA-participating students than non-participation students. Fourth, restricted resources limited the depth and number of questionnaires which could have skewed the dimensions of ECAs explored. For instance, certain ECAs had to be aggregated into one general domain. Lastly, participants were guided by a definition of ECA that the researcher provided (college-related activities), so there is a scope for variation across students in the types of ECAs chosen for discussion (i.e. non-collegiate activities, such as reading and hobbies). Despite these limitations, this study may pave a pathway for further research on the relationship among extracurricular activities and career aspiration levels.

### **Future Directions**

The research for this study presents a valuable foundation for future studies to expand on promoting career aspirations in college students. In this study, aspiration levels were investigated in driving a student's desire to obtain a successful career. However, other motivational processes, such as educational achievement or sense of school belonging, may play as underlying forces in steering a student's career. Further studies should take a longitudinal stance and understand the impact of ECA engagement on aspiration development throughout a student's life. Another important point to consider for future studies would be to increase the sample size to include a larger and more diverse geographical region, which may aid in obtaining significant results and generalizability of findings. Finally, future studies should adopt qualitative research in

addition to the quantitative self-report measures to gain further insight of the relationship among ECAs and career aspiration levels. For example, an open-ended interview would allow students to express their thoughts in their own, which would enhance the researchers' inductive reasoning. Further research is necessary to better understand the relationship between ECA participation and aspiration levels.

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**Appendix A**  
**Demographic Questionnaire**

Age: \_\_\_\_\_ years old

Gender:  Male  Female

Year in School:  Freshman  Sophomore  Junior  Senior

Marital Status:  Married  Single  Divorced  Separated   
Widowed

Race/Ethnic Origin:

- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Asian
- Black or African American
- Hispanic or Latino
- Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- Caucasian
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Grade Point Average (GPA): \_\_\_\_\_

Academic Major: \_\_\_\_\_

Living Location:  On-Campus  Off-Campus

## Appendix B

### Collegiate Extracurricular Activity Questionnaire

**\*Please read the following definition to base your following responses off of:**  
*Collegiate extracurricular activities are outside of the classroom time and not part of the core curriculum. They are structured and organized activities, typically student-led, and are affiliated to the college/university the student attends.*

1. Are you currently involved in collegiate extracurricular activities?  Yes  No

**If you answered “Yes” please answer Question #2 through Question #5. If you answered “No” please proceed to Question #6.**

- 
2. What extracurricular curricular activities do you currently participate in? Check all that apply.

- Athletics (e.g. Intercollegiate, Club or Intramural)
- Greek Life
- Student Government
- The Arts (e.g. Visual Arts, Performing Arts, Literary Arts, etc.)
- Academic Clubs (e.g. Psychology Alliance, Biology Club, Mathematics Society, etc.)
- Multicultural Clubs (e.g. Educators for Diversity and Social Equity, American Sign Language Club, African American Studies, etc.)
- Volunteer and Service-Related Activities (e.g. Circle K, Colleges Against Cancer, Habitat for Humanity, etc.)
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

3. How often do you participate in extracurricular activities? Check the ONE response that **best** applies to you.

- Almost Every Day
- Once or Twice a Week
- Once or Twice a Month
- Once Every Few Months
- About Once or Twice a Year

4. What prompts you to participate in extracurricular activities? Check the ONE response that **best** applies to you.

- I participate because I enjoy and have an interest in them.
  - I participate because it will help develop abilities and skills for my future.
  - I participate because of social reasons (my friends participate and/or I want to meet new people).
  - I participate because it will look good on my resume or CV for future employment opportunities or additional education.
  - Other: I participate because
- 

5. Do you hold a leadership position in your extracurricular activity?

- Yes  No

6. What prompts you to not to participate in extracurricular activities? Check the ONE response that **best** applies to you.

- I do not participate because I have no interest.
- I do not participate because I have no time due to work obligations.
- I do not participate because I have to focus on my schoolwork and extracurricular activities interfere with my studies.
- I do not participate because I need personal downtime.
- I do not participate because the college I attend does not offer what I am interested in.
- Other: I do not participate because
-

## Appendix C

### Career Aspiration Questionnaire

#### Career Aspiration Scale – Revised (Gregor & O'Brien, 2013)

**Directions:** In the space next to the statements below please circle a number from “0” (not at all true of me) to “4” (very true of me). If the statement does not apply, circle “0.” Please be completely honest. Your answers are entirely confidential and will be useful only if they accurately describe you.

Not at All	Slightly	Moderately	Quite a Bit	Very
True of me	True of me	True of me	True of me	True of me
0	1	2	3	4

1. I hope to become a leader in my career field.	0	1	2	3	4
2. I do not plan to devote energy to getting promoted to a leadership position in the organization or business in which I am working.	0	1	2	3	4
3. I want to be among the very best in my field.	0	1	2	3	4
4. Becoming a leader in my job is not at all important to me.	0	1	2	3	4
5. When I am established in my career, I would like to manage other employees.	0	1	2	3	4
6. I plan to reach the highest level of education in my field.	0	1	2	3	4
7. I want to have responsibility for the future direction of my organization or business.	0	1	2	3	4
8. I want my work to have a lasting impact on my field.	0	1	2	3	4
9. I aspire to have my contributions at work recognized by my employer.	0	1	2	3	4

10. I will pursue additional training in my occupational area of interest.	0	1	2	3	4
11. I will always be knowledgeable about recent advances in my field.	0	1	2	3	4
12. Attaining leadership status in my career is not that important to me.	0	1	2	3	4
13. Being outstanding at what I do at work is very important to me.	0	1	2	3	4
14. I know I will work to remain current regarding knowledge in my field.	0	1	2	3	4
15. I hope to move up to a leadership position in my organization or business.	0	1	2	3	4
16. I will attend conferences annually to advance my knowledge.	0	1	2	3	4
17. I know that I will be recognized for my accomplishments in my field	0	1	2	3	4
18. Even if not required, I would take continuing education courses to become more knowledgeable.	0	1	2	3	4
19. I would pursue an advanced education program to gain specialized knowledge in my field.	0	1	2	3	4
20. Achieving in my career is not at all important to me.	0	1	2	3	4
21. I plan to obtain many promotions in my organization or business.	0	1	2	3	4
22. Being one of the best in my field is not important to me.	0	1	2	3	4
23. Every year, I will prioritize involvement in continuing education to advance my career.	0	1	2	3	4
24. I plan to rise to the top leadership position of my organization or business.	0	1	2	3	4