

# DEFINING EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION: GUIDELINES AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

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## ABSTRACT

Student participation in extracurricular activities has been tied to a variety of positive outcomes. Unfortunately, the literature indicates that there is no generally agreed upon definition of extracurricular. As a result, attempts to measure extracurricular activities have resulted in considerable variance. This study argues that a more formal definition is needed to guide what is, and is not, an extracurricular activity. Based on a content analysis of the relevant literature, definitions of extracurricular and co-curricular activities are proposed. In doing so, it is intended to provide a foundation for more consistent measurement of extracurricular activity in scholarly research.

## INTRODUCTION

Student participation in extracurricular activities (ECA) has been identified as an important aspect of the higher education experience. [8]. Cole, Field, & Giles (2003), for example, note that extracurricular activities are associated with recruiter perceptions of leadership skills, interpersonal skills, and motivational qualities [7] [3] [16]. Chia (2005) found participation in ECAs to be correlated with the number of initial interviews that a student obtains upon graduation. [4] Participation has also been shown to transcend career success. Clotfelter (2001), for example, studied alumni donor characteristics and found that the level of contribution was associated with having participated in extracurricular activities in college. [6]

Unfortunately, a review of the literature also reveals important limitations in ECA research. In particular, there existed no known definition of extracurricular activity that is generally accepted. Instead, the concept is described through examples of vague terms, with little or no additional explanation. Barnett (2007), for example, simply notes that "...schools encourage students to participate in various extracurricular activities, such as athletics, vocational clubs, student government, newspapers and yearbooks, and special interest groups". [2, p. 316] Chia (2005) likens extracurricular activity to "non-academic endeavors" [4, p. 76]. Rubin, Bommer, and Baldwin (2002) suggest that extracurricular activity is "a place where students look to utilize, and perhaps refine and develop, their interpersonal skills." [16, p. 441]

A further review of the literature suggests that the lack of a generally accepted definition may have contributed to considerable variance in the way extracurricular activity has been operationalized in

empirical research. For example, “reading a book” has been identified as an extracurricular activity [15], as has “marriage” [1]. To complicate matters, some studies measure participation in terms of the number of extracurricular activities that a student participates without consideration for their relevancy. [14] [13]

The current study argues that the lack of a formal definition impedes scientific progress into our understanding of extracurricular activities because it does not allow proper classification. Furthermore, a lack of classification hinders the ability of ECA research to provide *bona fide* evidence of its influence on outcomes such as leadership abilities and other interpersonal skills. The purpose of this study, therefore, is to propose a formal definition and provide guidelines for classifying extracurricular activities.

## METHOD

The method involves a literature search and subsequent content analysis to identify the extent to which the term “extracurricular” and related terms are formally defined and used. This and other relevant information is then reviewed to develop definitions that reflect the presumed intent of research in the area of extracurricular activity. First, to provide a foundation, basic reference publications (e.g., dictionaries) are examined to obtain base-level definitions.

Next, the scholarly literature was examined to determine how terms were defined and used in the practice of scholarly research. The use of terms in professional practice was also evaluated to develop a better understanding of the relationship between the use of the terms in scholarly research and professional practice. That is, are scholars and practitioners using the terms in the same manner. In each analysis, the data was content analyzed and evaluated for coherence and consistency.

The search procedures utilized Internet search engines and library databases. The initial search term was “extracurricular”, but to ensure adequate coverage, related terms such as “clubs”, “intramural sports”, “bad” were also use along with “activities” and students”. In doing so, the probability of obtaining a representative sample was enhanced.

## ANALYSIS

An understanding of base-level definitions started with review of the term “curricular”. The Free Dictionary, for example, notes that “curricular” is the adjective form of the noun “curriculum” which refers to: (1) all the courses of study offered by an educational institution and (2) a group of related courses, often in a special field of study. (<http://www.thefreedictionary.com/curricular>). Curricular is then defined by the Free Dictionary as: “of or relating to an academic course of study”.

Next, consider that the word “extra” means: “More than or beyond what is usual, normal, expected, or necessary” (<http://www.thefreedictionary.com/extra>). Hence, it makes sense that extracurricular be defined as “Being outside the regular curriculum of a school or college” (<http://www.thefreedictionary.com/extracurricular>) The next question is whether or not this definition, or some variant, is used in the scholarly literature.

A database search of the scholarly literature using the identifier “extracurricular” resulted in slightly more than 50 articles. An analysis reveals no evidence of a generally accepted definition. Even in articles where some semblance of a definition was provided, it was sometimes difficult to interpret.

Clegg, Stevenson and Willott (2010), for example, used a case-study approach to examine perceptions of extracurricular activities by educational staff in the U.K. [5] They noted that “The little work that recognises the potential benefits of ECA, however, relies on an assumed common sense definition of extracurricular, and the boundaries between curricular and extracurricular activity are taken as obvious rather than analysed. Our research, therefore, aimed to explore these definitional issues.” [5, p. 617] Ironically, the authors did not propose a formal definition. Instead, they reported what education staff considered to be extracurricular and curricular. The authors conclude that “the boundaries between curricular and ECA were blurred, overlapping and inconsistently applied.” [5, p. 617]

Rather than providing a definition, some researchers merely explained how they classified extracurricular. For example, Eccles et al. (2003) categorized extracurricular activities into one of the following: (1) pro-social activities—church attendance and/or volunteer and community service type activities, (2) performance activities—school band, drama, and/or dance, (3) team sports—one or more school teams, (4) school involvement—student government, pep club, and/or cheerleading and, (5) academic clubs—debate, foreign language, math, or chess clubs, science fair, or tutoring in academic subjects. [10]

Other studies provide descriptors such as “Extracurricular activities refer to the participation in school and neighborhood activities” [15p. 24]. Fredricks and Eccles (2006) simply note that “Both scholars and youth policy advocates argue that participation in high-quality extracurricular activities, such as sports and school clubs, is a productive use of adolescents’ leisure time...” [11, p. 698] The use of a descriptive approach was the single most common way of “defining” extracurricular.

Extending the review beyond scholarly literature, the identifiers “extracurricular” and “definition” (or “defined”) were then used in a more broad Internet search of professional practice (e.g., school districts, governmental agencies). This resulted in 432,000 “hits”. Relevant sites within this list were reviewed for definitional content until redundancy was found. At that point, further review was suspended and representative definitions were selected.

The results reveal more detailed evidence regarding the parameters of extracurricular activity. Although descriptions differed, common characteristics emerged:

1. they are outside the classroom or regular curriculum.
2. they are conducted under the auspices of the school
3. they do not involve a grade or provide academic credit
4. they can be academic or non-academic
5. they are voluntary or optional

Using these characteristics as a foundation, a working definition can be proposed:

*Extracurricular activities are defined as academic or non-academic activities that are conducted under the auspices of the school but occur outside of normal classroom time and are not part of the curriculum. Additionally, extracurricular activities do not involve a grade or provide academic credit and participation in the activity is optional on the part of the student.*

In reviewing this definition, one might question whether it is overly restrictive. What happens, for example, when a student enrolled in a music course is required to participate in band activities? The

answer to this question is provided in the definition of *co-curricular*. Unfortunately, a review of the literature found guidance. For example, Darling, Caldwell and Smith (2005) use the term to describe “nonacademic, school-based activities”. [9, p. 52] Wren (1997) maintained that co-curricular activities include intramural sports, club programs, and student government experiences. [17] Hovet and Vinton (1993) stated that workshops to help students develop effective study and test-taking skills were co-curricular activities. [12]

Conversely, the practitioner literature provides more detailed information. One organization defines co-curricular as activities held in conjunction with graded class responsibilities.

(<http://www.elks.net/HS/hsguidance/eligibility.asp>) Other organizations have defined it in terms of activities that enhance and enrich the regular curriculum during the normal school day.

(<http://www.cumberlandschools.org/website/Interscholastic%20Sports.pdf>) Still, there appears to be a general lack of formal agreement. Therefore, an alternative analysis was conducted using the dictionary meaning. To accomplish this, the preface term “co” was found to mean “together” or “jointly”

(<http://www.yourdictionary.com/co-prefix>) indicating that a co-curricular activity is conducted alongside the curricular activity. When this is considered, the following working definition of co-curricular can be proposed:

*A co-curricular activity is one that requires a student to participate in an activity that is outside of normal classroom time and is a condition for receiving academic credit and/or a grade in a related component of the curriculum.*

While co-curricular and extracurricular activities each occur outside of the normal classroom time and both are conducted under the auspices of the educational unit, they differ in that co-curricular activity is required and is more highly aligned with the curriculum.

One might then ask whether or not an activity can be considered co-curricular in one case and extracurricular in another? Based on the proposed definitions, the answer is yes. To better understand, consider the case where a student is majoring in music and, additionally, a condition for graduation is participation in band. In this case, band would be classified as a co-curricular activity.

Alternatively, consider the case where a student is majoring in business, but voluntarily joins the band as a non-required activity. In this case, the activity is classified as extracurricular. The definitions, therefore, provide context for classification.

Building on this rationale, consider an activity that is not required, but is highly aligned with a student’s major. For example, a student might major in Finance and consequently join the Finance Club. Participation in the club is voluntary and is not tied to any grade or academic credit. Is this co-curricular or extracurricular? Certainly, it has aspects of co-curricular because it is closely aligned with the curriculum. Yet, it is voluntary and does not involve a grade or academic credit.

To help resolve this seeming conflict, it might help to distinguish between *direct* and *indirect* extracurricular activities:

*Extracurricular activities can be defined on a continuum from direct to indirect. A direct extracurricular activity is one that is more closely associated with the student’s major or curriculum. An indirect*

*extracurricular activity is one that is relatively unrelated to the students major or curriculum.*

Using this classification, examples of direct extracurricular activities include such things as business majors participating in business clubs/associations, business competitions, business honor societies, and the like. Alternatively, a business student who plays in the school band would be engaged in an indirect extracurricular activity. In each of these ways, the proposed definitions provide a foundation for classifying activities.

## GUIDELINES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The analysis provides a useful foundation for developing guidelines for future research. At a minimum, researchers studying extracurricular activities should adhere to the following guidelines:

1. Provide some definition of extracurricular activity.
2. Do not confuse extracurricular and co-curricular activities.
3. Distinguish between direct and indirect extracurricular activities.
4. Distinguish between leadership and member involvement.

The fourth guideline stems from prior research that indicates that involvement levels influence outcomes. Rubin, Bommer, and Baldwin (2002), for example, found that students who held a leadership position in a club or organization were perceived as having better interpersonal skills than students who did not hold leadership positions. [16]

In conclusion, this study has attempted to provide insights regarding the definition and classification of extracurricular activities. Although more attention to these issues is clearly needed, the proposed definitions and classification scheme can serve as a useful foundation for future discussion.

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