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## Research Notes

## Student organizations and Communities of Practice: Actions for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

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## ABSTRACT

This paper presents an analysis of student perspectives in a public college of management, signatory of the Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME) and demonstrates how these students are able to promote the 2030 Agenda of the Sustainable Development through their student organizations. Student organizations may be considered Communities of Practice (CoPs) since they are dynamic, interactive and not controlled by the institution. Thus, an exchange of knowledge and participants' engagement occurs naturally through shared values and practices. The proposed research question is "What are the values and practices shared in student organizations that are interpreted as CoPs in a public college of management that has concrete actions and potential to promote the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development?" A questionnaire was sent to all of the members of the nine student organizations, and it contained six open-ended questions as well as profile questions. The answers to the open-ended questions were submitted to qualitative and quantitative content analysis. The results show that there is evidence that student organizations connect people by their beliefs, passions and shared values to achieve several goals, acting as CoPs, and have concrete actions and potential to promote the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

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### 1. Introduction

The university environment provides a stage for social transformation through education, research and extension. Students play a central role in these changes, as they do not satisfy their personal desires by only being present in the classroom or by attending lectures with low class interaction; many students seek more. They search for fulfilment, personal growth and

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active participation in the social changes of their time. According to Baker (2008), students who engage in extracurricular activities during their time at university can outperform those who only attend classes.

In fact, in this context, student organizations emerge due to the students' search for "something more" (Castellanos, 2016; Talbert, Larke Jr., & Jones, 1999). Their performance is historically known and apparent in several universities around the world (Castellanos, 2016; Eklund-Leen & Young, 1997; Frieze & Blum, 2002; Talbert et al., 1999).

In a society that is less resigned, Communities of Practice (CoPs) unite people in mutual engagement and a value-sharing environment, thus turning practice into transforming actions (Wenger, 1998). CoPs may have different formats (Aljuwaiber, 2016; Brown & Duguid, 1991; Iverson & McPhee, 2002; Morley, 2016; Wenger, 1998, 2000), but they represent the expansion of student associations in live organizations with non-profit purposes and social goals. The concept of CoPs was developed by Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002, p. 4) as groups of *people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an on-going basis*.

It is important to study this term because the understanding of the values of student organizations can clarify whether there is an association between the characteristics of CoPs and the student organizations. This knowledge will allow us to describe how these organizations are built and to observe their similarities.

Moreover, it is important to observe the contemporary context of the claims for responsible leadership in a society that is surrounded by financial scandals, crises, environmental degradation and social inequalities. The Principles for Responsible Management (PRME), created in 2007 by the UN Global Compact (UN Global Compact, 2007), established an agenda for the training of responsible leaders during their pursuit of higher education with the aim of Sustainable Development. The students play a central role in the achievements of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for the 2030 Agenda (United Nations, 2015).

In the public college management school observed in this paper, there are approximately 1300 undergraduate students, and some of the students are enrolled in nine different student organizations. They practice sports, entrepreneurship, consulting, financial education, etc. Since PRME began operating in this business school in 2012, the presidents of these student organizations were invited to compose the PRME committee. In this way, a great part of the PRME principles and 2030 Agenda have been applied in this business school through the efforts and projects of the student organizations.

Thus, the objective of this study is to associate the values and practices of the student organizations at this specific management school with the CoPs characteristics in the context of social development. Therefore, the research question is "What are the values and practices shared in student organizations that may be interpreted as Communities of Practice in a public college of management that has concrete actions and potential to promote the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development?"

A self-administered questionnaire containing six open-ended questions and profile questions (i.e., gender, age, class, semester, course and student organization) was distributed over the Internet to the members of these student organizations. The answers to the open-ended questions were submitted to qualitative and quantitative content analysis according to the methodologies and techniques in Krippendorff (2004). Additionally, Nvivo Pro content analysis software, version 11.3 for Windows, was used to support the text organization analysis and the manual content coding.

The study is focused only on the development of Agenda 2030 by student organizations, but we understand that there are also other motivations for students to participate in these student organizations not addressed in this paper. At the end of this manuscript, we present the results, the limitations and future research suggestions.

## 2. Theoretical perspectives

### 2.1. United Nations' call for action

Human beings are drastically changing the planet, and scientists have adopted the new term *Anthropogenic* to denote the human-driven age of the planet (Griggs et al., 2013; Sachs, 2012). In higher education, faculty and students were called upon by the United Nations to fulfil the Sustainable Development agenda in the 21st Century, which was created in 2007 by the Initiative Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME) through the UN Global Compact (Alcaraz & Thiruvattal, 2010; Buono, Haertle, & Kurz, 2015; Sobczak & Mukhi, 2016; UN Global Compact, 2007).

The first time that the United Nations addressed education was in 1948 with Article 26 of the UN Declaration on Human Rights. Other milestones are the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) developed in 2000 and, more recently, the SDGs developed in 2015 (King, 2016).

The MDGs were a positive experience, and important achievements have been made in the 15 years between 2000 and 2015 (Griggs et al., 2014, 2013; Hák, Janoušková, & Moldan, 2016); however, the SDGs need the unprecedented mobilization of global knowledge operating across many sectors and regions (Sachs, 2012).

The document "Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development", which covers 17 SDGs and 169 targets, was formally adopted at the special session of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) on 25 September 2015 (United Nations, 2015), and was addressed to both developed and developing economies; however, the principal focus of the SDGs is still on 'developing countries' and 'least developed countries' (King, 2016). SDGs need concerted global efforts and good governance at all levels, including local, national, regional, and global levels (Sachs, 2012). As a result, the higher education students are natural stakeholders, leaders in training, and immediate agents of change for the achievement of the 2030 Agenda.

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