



OMG! I'm a Student Leader!

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Marketing club meeting, 2:45 pm, Greek Recruitment event, 3:30 pm, Student Government Executive Board meeting, 4:45 pm, and oh yeah ... class! This jammed-packed schedule is all too familiar to student leaders enrolled in colleges and universities across the country who are finding themselves to be overly involved in co-curricular activities. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, of the 2.1 million first-year college students enrolled in the fall of 2009, 400,000 of them failed their freshman year because of excessive student involvement [Labor, 2010].

The OMG Moment

Student leadership is a wonderful part of the college experience. There are opportunities for personal and professional growth, the ability to make a positive impact on others, and it can lead to job opportunities in the future. The other side to student leadership is the side many don't notice until it's too late. Student leaders are bombarded with demanding commitments such as composing agendas, executive board retreats and, of course, meetings—lots and lots of meetings. Students with this type of college lifestyle are in danger of experiencing the OMG moment.

An OMG moment is like a splash of cold water in the middle of a deep sleep. It's the time student leaders realize just what they've done to themselves. This moment comes when you need it the least, right in the middle of the semester when you realize you're on three different executive boards, a general member of four different clubs, and you've got the biggest group project of the semester staring you right in the face. This is the time when you say to yourself, "OMG! I'm a student leader!"

Soon, before you know it, you may well have an OMG moment. There is, however, a way to avoid this. I'd like to offer you three simple, yet powerful, tools that, if used wisely, will help build your résumé, downsize your commitments, and prioritize your time.

O: Don't Over-Occupy Your Time

Saying yes is easy; in fact, it's very satisfying. It's also one of the most dangerous words in the English language. When you're a student leader, it's so easy to say yes to student organizations, advisors and your peers, all of whom believe in your ability to be an effective leader. Taking on leadership positions in clubs and organizations is great, but can have a long lasting effect on your grade point average in both positive and negative ways. Managing your time is essential to success, both personally and professionally. In short, don't over-occupy your time with too many commitments. If you're a member of three organizations, take a leadership position in only one of them. If you're a member of four or more, create a balance of high-demand organizations to low-demand organizations. Occupying your time wisely can prevent poor academic performance, low contributions to your student organizations, and of course, the OMG moment.

In *Impacts of Campus Involvement on Hospitality Student Achievement and Satisfaction*, Dean Yin and Simon A. Lei examine campus involvement and its effect on satisfaction and academic achievement. "Students who are frequently involved in campus events have relatively little time and energy for academic work because their psychic and physical time and energy are finite" (Yin, Lei, 2008, p. 287). When you over-occupy your time, you're literally killing your energy and creativity. This is the norm for many student leaders, as co-curricular involvement is essential to gaining the most out of your college experience.

During my first semester at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater, I had no intentions of getting as involved as much as I did. However, in my failed quest to become a "normal" college student, I overextended myself before I could even get settled into my residence hall. In my first semester, I became the vice president of the Black Student Union, a resident assistant and a campus tour guide, and I began showing interest in my fraternity, Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc. When my grades were released, I ended the semester with a 1.6 GPA.

During that semester, I had yet to learn the meaning of a very important word—NO! You don't have to say yes to every opportunity. If someone asks you to attend a function you just don't have time for, say no. If you find yourself in a situation where you feel like you're taking on more work than you should, say no.

In *The Power of a Positive No*, William Ury writes, "True leadership is not so much about saying yes; it's about saying no" (p.17) This is a powerful quote, as so many student leaders lack the ability to say no and still maintain positive relationships. During my years as a student leader, I said yes to everyone, even if I didn't want to. At first, it felt good because I wasn't hurting anyone's feelings, but soon I became burned out and angry with myself because I made commitments I really didn't want to make. Learning to say no isn't easy, but once you get into the habit of evaluating a request before you give an answer, you'll find yourself saying yes to the things that matter and no to the things that don't.

Take the OMG Challenge

Many students can avoid the OMG moment by knowing their current status of student involvement. An easy way to do that is to take the OMG Challenge.

Lightly Involved

1–2 student organizations

- Interested in general membership
- Seeking networking opportunities
- Interested in meeting new people

Moderately Involved

2–4 student organizations

- At least one executive board position
- Willing to take on major tasks
- Interested in connecting co-curricular involvement to career

Excessively Involved

4 or more student organizations

- At least two or more executive board positions
- Seeking more opportunities

Taking the challenge can be a serious wake-up call. Try taking it at the beginning of each semester to get a good look at your upcoming student involvement load.

M: Manage Your Commitments Wisely

So you've learned the power and benefit of saying no. Next, you must learn the art of managing the commitments to which you've agreed. Prioritizing your commitments is a skill that comes with time. You must order your life before it orders you! With the organizations to which you've committed, it's a virtual certainty that one will be more demanding than the other. In order to accurately apply the "M," you must challenge yourself! Ask yourself tough questions that will require you to make key decisions. If you're majoring in public relations, don't be afraid to ask yourself questions like, "Do I really need to skip the PRSSA meeting to blow up balloons for my sorority recruitment event?" These questions will surely be difficult, as you will have a close personal connection to the commitments you've made.

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My second year at the UW-Whitewater was one I'll never forget. Even after my disastrous first semester, I had yet to learn my lesson. In fact, despite my unbelievably low grade point average, I was still eager to join more student organizations. I can remember walking through campus and a student org flyer would catch my eye. I would stop, take a quick look at the flyer, join the org, attend two or three meetings, and volunteer to run for an executive board position. By the spring semester of 2006, I was president of the Black Student Union, secretary of Alpha Phi Alpha, a member of the Student Optimist club, the American Marketing Association, and oh yeah ... I still had classes. The good thing is that my grades actually improved as I ended my sophomore year with a 1.8 GPA.

By the summer of 2006, I had discovered something about myself: I was a dynamic student leader, but I was a train wreck of a student. Had I learned not to over-occupy my time the semester before, I would've been a better student and student leader the following semester because I would've been able to give adequate time to both my studies and co-curricular involvement. Managing your commitments wisely is a skill that takes patience and effort. If you learn to prioritize the commitments you've made, you'll maintain room in your schedule for what's most important—academics.

G: Remember to Graduate!

Now that you've mastered the "O" and the "M," you would think you might have a good handle on the student leadership experience. Right? Wrong! There is one more piece to consider—Graduation. Graduation is the most forgotten part of the student leadership experience. Co-curricular involvement so often gets in the way of academics that students tend to forget what's most important. In short, excessive involvement causes students to "forget about graduation."

Each time you skip a class to fulfill an involvement commitment, you're forgetting to graduate. Each time you decide not to study as hard or as long because you'd like to attend a social function, you're forgetting to graduate. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, in 2009, more than 70.1 percent of high school graduates will enroll in colleges and universities. Six out of 10 of those students will be excessively involved. Two out of those 10 will fail at some point in

their college career because of that involvement (Labor, 2010). These students entered college with a goal to obtain their degree, but somewhere along the way, lost sight of that goal in the pursuit of student leadership. Don't let this happen to you!

Any student can have co-curricular involvement on their résumé, but if there are no letters behind their name, their involvements will be virtually meaningless. On your journey to graduation and beyond, you must remember to keep sight of what's important. Student leadership is a wonderful part of the college experience, but it's not the only, or even the most important, part. Remember: don't over-occupy your time, do manage your commitments wisely, and remember to graduate. If you apply these tools to your life, the next time you have the OMG moment, it will be just as you're crossing the stage when you say to yourself, "OMG! I'm a college graduate!"

References

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About the Author

Rick Daniels is the leadership advisor for Greeks at the **University of Wisconsin-Whitewater** and CEO of The Axis Group, LLC, an independent consulting firm specializing in motivational speaking, event planning and brand management. He is a frequent speaker for student audiences, leadership conferences and conventions across the country on a variety of topics, including student leadership, Greek life and social media.

