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The Role and Impact of Employee Resource Groups in Higher Education: An In-Depth Case Study of Montgomery College's MCRPA

ERGs

— AT MONTGOMERY COLLEGE —

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Montgomery College (MC) is an educational institution known for its diverse student body and broad range of programs.

Established in 1946 in Montgomery County, Maryland, MC is home to over 50,000 credit and noncredit students from more than 155 countries. Alongside its student body, MC prides itself on its highly dedicated faculty and staff, over 3,500 in total, who are instrumental in driving the college's commitment to academic excellence and inclusivity.

Workplace belonging is a cornerstone for a productive, positive, and cohesive work environment. Studies have shown that feelings of belonging can directly contribute to increased job satisfaction, happiness at work, and reduced chances of burnout (Black et al., 2019). These feelings also foster institutional commitment and stability and spur creativity and innovation, elements crucial for the continued success of an educational institution (Zambrana, 2018). MC is no different and has emphasized fostering a strong sense of community within its ranks.

One of the ways MC achieves this is through the Montgomery College Rising Professionals Association (MCRPA). Established in 2011, MCRPA is an employee resource group (ERG) developed for employees by employees, and it seeks to empower its members and support them in their professional journey. The association nurtures a sense of belonging for employees and promotes collegiality, community engagement, and collaboration and, through these efforts, promotes and contributes to student success and productivity.

MCRPA: AN IN-DEPTH EXPLORATION
—— of ERGs in Higher Education ——

ERGs have become a crucial part of the fabric of contemporary organizations. They serve as platforms that promote unity, equity, inclusion, and social justice within their host institutions (Welbourne et al., 2017). In the context of higher education, ERGs like MCRPA provide a space for faculty and staff to interact, collaborate, and flourish both professionally and personally (Welbourne & McLaughlin, 2013). Its unique approach to community building sets MCRPA apart from typical ERGs. MCRPA does not merely unite individuals based on shared identities but goes a step further, focusing on shared aspirations for personal growth, learning, and community service.

In the context of MC, MCRPA plays an essential role in instigating change, promoting innovation, and cultivating a sense of belonging among employees. This role is particularly valuable for new employees, as it allows them to connect with colleagues beyond their immediate departments and better understand the organizational culture. Moreover, MCRPA serves as a platform for open dialogue, facilitating the exchange of feedback and building trust among its members.

Despite the support from senior leadership and the college's president, MCRPA often grapples with a lack of resources. It would greatly benefit from an allocated budget and recognition of the efforts of ERG volunteers in annual performance reviews. With increased resources, MCRPA could expand its membership and influence by including students in its activities. Such an expansion would allow for a more diverse range of feedback and representation within the college and the community.

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE, VISION, AND IMPACT OF MCRPA

The organizational structure of MCRPA is such that it presents additional opportunities for its members to gain professional and leadership experience. Through participation in various committees, members can gain valuable experience and grow on a personal level. However, MCRPA does face challenges. For instance, due to the lack of budget to support its activities, there are no rewards for members to incentivize participation in leadership roles other than intrinsic motivation. Additionally, based on the varying degrees of experience from the volunteer members, the objectives of meetings are not always strategically defined. Despite these challenges, MCRPA has maintained a diverse membership base and implemented robust organizational practices. It also continues to create numerous strategic opportunities for its members.

The vision of MCRPA is centered on providing an inclusive environment where everyone is given the opportunity to develop and succeed. With over 150 active members, MCRPA has shown a clear commitment to fulfilling this vision, and its impact is felt across the college. The work of MCRPA has already begun to transform MC by fostering the development of its employees, empowering members to expand their networks, and increasing opportunities to demonstrate career-ready competencies.

NURTURING LEADERSHIP AND INCLUSIVITY:

MCRPA's Innovative Approach and Impact

Building on a rich tradition of fostering leadership skills, self-awareness, empathy, emotional intelligence, and conflict resolution among its members, MCRPA has broadened its scope over the last 10 years. Its focus on personal growth and career development now extends to nurturing others to reach their full potential, signaling the next evolution of the association. The MCRPA logo, depicted in Figure 1, symbolizes this innovative ethos of mutual upliftment, with its design reflecting members helping each other ascend a ladder.

The proposed inclusion of students in MCRPA's initiatives marks an exciting step in this direction. With targeted learning opportunities, scholarships, expanded mentoring schemes, and recognition for exemplary role models, the association aims to inculcate a culture of communal growth that extends to student involvement (Astin, 1999). This progression reflects the broader organizational mission of fostering a diverse and inclusive community within MC and strengthening the commitment to student success.

STUDENT IMPACT

Freeman and Bruun (2022) argue that employee satisfaction in higher education, often overlooked, significantly influences student success. They emphasize that faculty and staff morale impact the learning environment and student experiences, and they advocate for more research to confirm the relationship between staff satisfaction and student outcomes.

The concept of employee satisfaction influencing student success resonates in testimonials from MCRPA members. Members underscore the organization's role in fostering a supportive community, thereby enhancing employee morale. They describe MCRPA as a tool for retention, enabling them to contribute to a positive culture while promoting wellbeing and finding purpose.

This approach breaks down isolation, providing a platform for knowledge exchange and a shared sense of mission in serving students. Moreover, the members align MCRPA's actions with the core values of MC, noting that the organization effectively translates these values into practice, including through mentorship and skills growth. This collective commitment ensures employees' personal and professional development and has a positive ripple effect on student outcomes, echoing the linkage Freeman and Bruun (2022) highlight between staff satisfaction and student success.

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MEASURABLE
OUTCOMES

An integral part of MCRPA's strategy is its commitment to data-driven decision making. As such, the association uses measurable outcomes to evaluate its success and shape future initiatives. Over the years, MCRPA's membership has grown steadily, a trend it aims to continue, particularly with the proposed expansion of its mentorship initiatives.

By each member identifying 2 students to participate in MCRPA events and targeted professional development programs, the association aims to impact over 200 students directly. Beyond this, MCRPA seeks to reach out to student club representatives, student life contacts, and student council members through the governance system. The shift towards virtual events has expanded the association's potential to engage with students, as physical space limitations no longer constrain it. The potential to impact many students by offering them career-ready competencies and showcasing the practices of an ERG is immense.

Moreover, reaching out to established MC employees could potentially boost membership, facilitate more mentoring connections for employees and students alike, and further embody the association's commitment to mutual support, as symbolized in Figure 1. An indicator of success would be increased membership, enabling the association to impact more students directly.

Looking ahead, MCRPA leadership will continue leveraging available technologies to collect feedback for improving the association's programs and services. This commitment to iterative improvement and adaptation underscores MCRPA's ethos of growth and development for its members and the broader MC community. MCRPA remains poised to help its members and students write their career stories and forge a path toward bright professional futures through its innovative practices and inclusive growth approach.

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FUTURE CONSIDERATIONS +
PATH FORWARD

Despite its success, MCRPA has yet to receive formal recognition from MC. MCRPA's commitment to aligning with MC's strategic vision and new presidential priorities led to a presentation to the college president. The intent was to demonstrate MCRPA's instrumental role in actualizing the goals of MC's new strategic plan and its dedication to nurturing a vibrant, diverse, and inclusive community at MC.

MCRPA recommends that MC provide an official endorsement to solidify its status within the college's framework. It also advocates for representation in the college's shared governance structure and solicits funding from MC to support activities and initiatives. With official recognition, representation in shared governance, and adequate funding, MCRPA will be able to fully realize its potential and contribute significantly to the success of MC.

Looking forward, MCRPA aims to continually adapt its operations to suit the evolving needs of its members and MC. MCRPA believes that a holistic approach to employee development that encompasses personal, professional, and community engagement will drive the college forward. The journey may be challenging, but with collective effort and support, MCRPA is confident it can make a lasting impact.

MCRPA remains committed to cultivating a sense of belonging among employees, fostering an inclusive and productive work environment in line with MC's mission. Its work aims to redefine how ERGs contribute to the higher education sector and continue to drive positive change within MC.

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