Discussion

Participant response indicates that this is a highly social generation of students. They spend a combined average of 34.5 hours per week interacting with friends in both traditional and non-traditional social settings.

They are comfortable with the technology of electronic communications and social interaction in electronic networks such as Facebook and MySpace. This should come as no surprise, considering they are a part of the first generation that has never known life without much of today’s technology, including broadband Internet, computer graphics in video games, animated movies, cellular phones, instant messaging, MP3 players and iPods, text messaging, social networking, and blogs.

The results revealed that students were actively involved in club activities with 79% indicating involvement in one or more clubs or student organizations. However, only 28% were involved in club activities sponsored by the Department of Agricultural Economics at Texas A&M University.

Assessment of participant responses indicated that students held misconceptions about the purpose and activities of AGEC-sponsored clubs. They appeared to associate clubs’ activities narrowly, focused on specific careers or industry, based only on clubs’ name. They perceived that activities of these clubs were centered on professional development, meeting potential employers, and enhancing their résumé through club participation. They exhibited a general lack of awareness about the community service and social programs for each club.

Overall, they failed to associate club involvement with areas of psychosocial development, such as developing mature relationships, improving an individual’s ability to think,
improving their ability to make decisions, development of personal integrity, and development of a personal identification.

Many participants commented that they would like to see the AGEC department become more aggressive in promoting its club activities. A common observation was that by the time they found out about AGEC clubs, they had already committed their available time to involvement in other clubs, or they were approaching the end of their collegiate career and felt that they became aware of the clubs too late to benefit from club participation.

Communication methods traditionally used by the AGEC department to communicate club participation to students have lost their effectiveness. A frequent complaint voiced by participants was that they were not aware of club meeting dates, times, and programs. This was somewhat surprising since the department utilized several methods of communicating with students to create awareness of club and departmental activities.

Participants selected e-mail, in-class announcements, social networks such as Facebook, and club Web sites as the preferred methods of staying informed about club activities. However, they also indicated they were most apt to respond to a personal invitation from students who were already participating in those activities.

These results have implications for advising student clubs and organizations, as well as for classroom management and general communication with students. Today’s student has an extensive list of alternative activities competing for their time and attention, making it vital that the AGEC department provide timely information about clubs and activities in a format most convenient for students’ access. Several alternatives are available to the department to help it accomplish communication efforts including e-mail, club Web sites, text messages, and blogs.
Institutions utilizing a learning management system such as Angel, Blackboard Vista, eCollege, or Moodle might consider creating a site within the learning management system that hosts general information about club activities. Such a system could be expanded beyond club activities to include student handbooks, department policies, and streaming videos that provide instructions about class registration, developing degree plans, and other activities that often consume much of an instructor’s or advisor’s time.

It is important to consider the social culture of this generation and the participants’ comments about their likelihood for responding to other students about their club involvement. Instead of asking instructors to make announcements in class, the AGEC department should consider providing streaming video or podcasts featuring current students describing what AGEC club involvement has meant to them. AGEC could also create short videos or podcasts featuring club officers discussing upcoming programs, activities, and important dates.

Incorporating students’ propensity for information technology use into departmental communication efforts could easily facilitate changes in overall effectiveness of student advising through the creation of asynchronous, online workshops focused on club activities and the benefits of club involvement. Once again, students who are currently involved in club activities should be included in workshop materials through the use of streaming video. In fact, these students should be facilitators and/or presenters in the videos, thus minimizing the visual presence of an instructor, advisor, or department administrator in the workshop. Successful completion of the workshop could be required for all incoming freshmen or transfer students before they are allowed to register for classes, thereby assuring that all incoming students have been made aware of the value of AGEC club involvement.
This study provided a summary snapshot of the average student in the Texas A&M University AGEC Department. There are issues that need further examination and provide the basis for future research. For example, these data were collected late in the fall semester. It would be of interest to observe whether a higher response rate could be achieved by conducting the survey early in the semester, when students are not as focused on academics. Additionally, the responses from freshmen and transfer students might be different if the study were conducted after these groups of students had been enrolled for a full semester. Many students in these particular groups indicated that they were just getting oriented to college life and had not had the opportunity to explore club involvement options. Conducting the study in the spring semester might yield a higher response rate and a higher awareness of the AGEC department’s clubs.

Future research might also investigate the relationship between the number of hours spent participating in club activities and students’ comfort levels with public speaking, interpersonal skills, leadership roles, and functioning in elected offices.