



RESEARCH

# THE STABILITY IN STUDENT ORGANIZATIONS OVER TIME

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This article explores the stability of student organizations along two main dimensions: number of students and length of existence. Also, we examine if the national presence of a student organization affects student organizational stability. Using Howard University yearbooks to examine a large population of African American students, we found that stability varies greatly by type of organization. In terms of the number of students, we found that the most stable organizations were the national social groups. In terms of length of existence, we found the Pan-Hellenic organizations to be the most stable.

## INTRODUCTION

Student organizations are present on virtually all colleges and universities and range from national groups with a focus on service to local groups that allow individuals from similar backgrounds to meet and share commonalities. Student involvement in particular organizations may lead to students being more successful, and this has been particularly true for honors organizations, according to Cosgrove (2003). Naturally, the compositions of student organizations are subject to myriad interests and backgrounds. Some organizations persist while the student body changes both numerically and demographically nearly every year.

This research focuses on the stability of campus organizations from 1989 to 2009, with the intent of providing students and administrators with a general idea of the types of groups that tend to flourish over the long term. Unlike prior studies that focus on the outcomes of students involved in student organizations, we provide an exploratory analysis of the stability in student organizations along two main dimensions: number of students and length of existence. We focus on student organizational stability since established organizations are likely to be more effective in improving performance and integration. We created a student organization data set and match this data with academic records data from Howard University, a premier Historically Black College and University (HBCU), to answer two important questions: (1) How does membership in campus organizations vary over time? (2) What are the characteristics of the campus organizations that have the most longevity? The answers to these questions will hopefully encourage further research on student organizational stability, aid administrative decisions regarding funding and opportunities for organizational growth, as well as inform students interested in creating new groups on the types of organizations that historically enjoyed relative stability.

According to the U.S. News and World Report 2019 Statistics, Howard University, a private institution founded in 1867, has a total undergraduate enrollment of 6,354 students. Howard's 258-acre urban campus is home to 13 schools and colleges. The university utilizes a semester-based academic calendar and reported tuition and fees of \$

26,756 for the 2018-2019 academic calendar. Based on the 2019 edition of the “U.S. News Best Colleges: National University Rankings,” Howard University ranked 89th out of 312 schools.<sup>1</sup> As mentioned previously, Howard is a Historically Black University. Based on statistics from the US Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics, HBCUs continue to provide postsecondary education for a significant share of African Americans. According to the US Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights, HBCUs were established to provide postsecondary education to blacks who “were generally denied admission to traditionally white institutions” due to public policies that prohibited the education of blacks.

The mission statement of Howard University highlights its original and continuing commitment to both quality and longevity as an institution of comprehensive educational offerings at the undergraduate, professional, and graduate levels. In addition, the mission statement lays the foundation for the significance of cultural, social, and academic activities that are varied, sustainable, and important to an exceptional education of lasting value. Howard University’s mission statement is as follows: “Howard University, a culturally diverse, comprehensive, research-intensive and historically Black private university, provides an educational experience of exceptional quality at the undergraduate, graduate, and professional levels to students of high academic standing and potential, with particular emphasis upon educational opportunities for Black students. Moreover, the University is dedicated to attracting and sustaining a cadre of faculty who are, through their teaching, research, and service, committed to the development of distinguished, historically aware, and compassionate graduates and the discovery of solutions to human problems in the United States and throughout the world. With an abiding interest in both domestic and international affairs, the University is committed to continuing to produce leaders for America and the global community.”<sup>3</sup>

To answer the questions previously mentioned, we created a comprehensive data set of Howard University student organizations by utilizing Howard University’s Yearbooks from 1989- 2009. We matched yearbook data with student academic records for the same years. The data set also included a host of student demographic characteristics and academic records. With this data, we quantitatively analyzed student organizational stability utilizing the number of students participating in an organization to examine student membership in campus organizations over time and to determine the characteristics of the campus organizations that have the most longevity. Since the focus of this article is not to examine individual student organization dynamics, we classify and analyze student organizations based on categories consistent with the Howard University Yearbooks. Based on our analysis of the university’s yearbooks and student records, we found that the stability of organizations varied greatly by organizational type. In particular, we found the most stable organizations, based on the number of students, to be national social organizations. Also, the most stable organizations, based on years of existence, were the Pan-Hellenic organizations.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

According to the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (1987) and American Council on Education (1949), the typical role of higher education is to preserve, transmit, and enrich society through instruction, research, and other scholarly activities. Extracurricular activities, e.g., participation in student organizations, are compliments to classroom activities and provide students with essential real-world training and skill development (Montelongo, 2002). Further, there is a relatively large literature on the relationship between participation in student organizations and academic performance and social integration, respectively, and relatively small literature on the importance of student organizational longevity. Below, we briefly highlight the literature in the three areas mentioned above.

### **Academic Performance**

There are various types of student organizations on college campuses, and the impacts of student organizations on academic performance are mixed (Astin, 1993; Baker, 2008; Bowman & Culver, 2018; Insler & Karam, 2019). Astin’s seminal book provides a thorough examination of student outcomes and how they are affected by college environments. Relying on a longitudinal survey of about 25,000 college students, Astin found that student to student interactions, through student organizations, group projects for classes, tutoring other students, etc., led

to positive overall academic development. Using the National Longitudinal Survey of Freshmen and focusing on underrepresented minorities attending selective colleges, Baker (2008) found that the relationship between student organizations and academic achievement differs by organizational type and race and gender of the student. Bowman & Culver (2018) relied on survey data from forty-six four-year institutions and propensity score matching methods. They found that honors programs predicted higher grade point averages, retention, and four-year graduation rates, especially for underrepresented minorities. For students that participate in intercollegiate athletics, sports participation has been found to reduce recruited athletes' grades (Insler & Karam, 2019).

### **Social Integration**

Hartshorne (1943) noted that in campus organizational involvement, "there is ideal generational continuity (in transmitting) a cultural heritage." Harthorne posited that incoming first-year students socialize with upper-level students directly and indirectly. Further, these interactions help to pass down information/norms that are embedded in the college culture. Hartshorne also posited that members of functional organizations are chosen from those students who share a common background, including having graduated from the same high school. Potential members are likely selected based on the likelihood of their acceptance of the group's informal standards rather than any specific qualifications. Hartshorne states that "the informal or latent function of the group may come to be as important as the ostensible or formal function" (p. 322).

Student organizations play an essential role in social integration. Using survey data from African American students attending predominantly White institutions (PWIs), Sutton and Kimbrough (2001) found that African American students marginally participated in traditional predominantly white student organizations because of an "unwelcoming" campus climate. This unwelcoming climate was also noted by Brown (1991), Mallory (1997), Person & Christensen (1996), and Rooney (1985). In a similar vein, Sergent & Sedlacek (1990) found that African American students on predominantly white campuses were less likely to participate in student councils or student unions and homecoming committees. However, in multicultural organizations that were also predominantly White, Sutton & Kimbrough (2001) found that African American students thrived due to a sense of self-satisfaction in helping the community at large, but these studies were in environments where African American students were a minority on these campuses.

Another aspect relevant to student participation in organizations is the concept of "mattering." Rosenberg & McCullough (1981) define "mattering" as the belief that students matter to an organization. They go on to suggest that there are three important areas: attention, importance, and dependence. Rosenberg and McCullough postulated that feeling appreciated by others and seeking approval from others have a profound influence on human behaviors. They state that "mattering represents a compelling social obligation and a powerful source of social integration" and that "we are bonded to society not only by virtue of our dependence on others but on their dependence on us."

Similarly, Person & Christensen (1996) performed a study examining African American culture at a predominantly White liberal arts and engineering college. They found that students joined groups to support each other and came together to celebrate their history and to address racial identity developmental issues. But these results are again restricted to African Americans in PWIs. At other types of institutions, these students might join organizations for different reasons.

Grubb (2006) examined the academic impacts of student participation in Greek organizations and investigated the characteristics of Greek membership. Grubb found that Greek organizations disproportionately attract students from out of state because these organizations provide a "substitute" for distant family, community, and social networks.

Dugan (2008) used latent class analysis and cluster analysis to "explore whether latent phenomena could be identified to assist in the classification of students into subgroups." Dugan surmised that four latent factors underlie "patterns of student involvement in co-curricular group experiences." The latent factors were the breadth of involvement, the difference between identity and expression, and sports-related patterns, the distinction between

art and academic careers, and the contrast between traditional collegiate experiences versus a more diffused or nonspecific pattern.

### **Organizational Longevity**

Kuk, Thomas, & Banning (2008) described a typology in which student organizations are classified. Their research may provide an important element in understanding why some organizations are more apt to survive on a college campus than others. Thomas & Cross (2007) identified critical survival elements. They state that “[f]our distinct place agents’ typologies have been identified: transformational, contributive, contingent, and exploitative.” This place typology is important in helping school administrators to foster a better relationship with campus/student organizations.

In answering the research questions as to the stability of campus organizations, this research explores the factors that influence membership over time and what organizations have longevity within the campus culture. The unique dataset from Howard University enabled insight into the trends in student involvement at an institution where the majority of students are African American. Such data is largely underrepresented in the literature.

## METHODOLOGY

Based on the body of literature that has studied student organizations, student organizations play an important role in student academic performance and social integration, and the effects may vary by race and gender. Further, established organizations are likely to be more effective in improving performance and integration. To examine student organizational stability, we created a comprehensive data set for student organizations at Howard University, a Historically Black University, and match this data with student records. Ideally, data on student organizations would have been obtained from Howard University’s Office of Student Activities, but this information was not available for use for academic research. As the next best alternative, we relied on Howard University’s award-winning yearbook that has been published annually for several decades. The yearbook documents the names and types of campus organizations on Howard University’s campus. We elected to use the Howard University yearbook as it was the most comprehensive resource available for accounting for student organizations across the university. For a nominal fee, these yearbooks were obtained from various locations across the country for the years 1989- 2009. The campus organizations were cataloged by hand from these yearbooks.

Once we had a listing of organizations and student names by year, we then grouped the organizations as follows: academic and professional, Pan-Hellenic, honors, political, religious, social, state, and regional, student councils, and university-wide organizations. These categories corresponded with the university’s official categories as of December 12, 2009. Academic and professional organizations are defined as organizations that either pertain to academics or a profession. Similarly, honors societies also focus on academics, yet they usually have a grade point average (GPA) requirements for becoming and remaining a member of the organization. Pan-Hellenic organizations are composed of nine historically black fraternities and sororities. Our research showed that religious groups were not uniquely associated with particular religious affiliations. At the same time, political organizations that were focused on politics were not necessarily limited to Republican and Democratic parties. Social organizations and state and regional organizations were similar in that they both allow students from different backgrounds to meet and share commonalities. However, state and regional organizations focused on bringing students from the same states and regions of the country together, while social organizations generally did not have this same focus. Lastly, student councils and university-wide organizations consisted of school and dormitory councils and organizations, especially media organizations, which informed the entire campus.

We then determined if the organization was only located on Howard University’s campus or could be found elsewhere. For example, organizations such as the Connecticut Club were unique to Howard University, lacking a national organization or presence outside of the campus. Organizations such as the NAACP exist around the nation, or in other words, exist outside of Howard. We juxtapose these two different groups, Howard University-only versus national campus organizations, comparing their stability relative to each other.

To assist with stability characteristics, we noted that campus organizations appeared to change names or names were inputted differently from year to year in the yearbook. However, with the help of the Office of Student Activities, we were able to determine which organizations were the same despite having different names. For example, we found that in 1993 the New York State Club self-identified as New Yorkers Unlimited.<sup>5</sup> Once these differences in names were identified and verified, we counted the number of people in each organization for each year and discarded the non-identifiable names. Although it was interesting to know the names of the students in the organizations, their names were not necessary to answer our research questions. Once we had a workable dataset, we culled through each yearbook, making sure that the counted names matched the number of names listed.

Our sample consists of 316 unique student organizations. We also matched student academic records to their student organization affiliation. Thus, the data had over 6,000 students for each academic term and year. Table 1 shows how many organizations existed for each year. Because there were no records that illustrated an accurate number of organizations on campus for each year, we sent our list to the Office of Student Activities to ascertain the number that we had verified. We were informed that our list for the 2007, 2008, and 2009 years provided about 50 percent of the active student organizations on campus. We assumed, due to the importance of the yearbook at Howard University, that a significant proportion of active members participated in being in the yearbook, and this proportion was constant across groups. Although we only capture approximately half of the student organizations, our sample size is large enough for robust and rigorous statistical inference. Table 1 provides a summary of the total number of student organizations as determined by the Howard University Yearbook.

**Table 1. Total number of student organizations from Howard University yearbooks.**

Year	No. of Organizations	Year	No. of Organizations
1989	53	2000	120
1990	67	2001	105
1991	83	2002	49
1992	50	2003	100
1993	65	2004	86
1994	83	2005	78
1995	80	2006	100
1996	83	2007	93
1997	63	2008	121
1998	58	2009	102
1999	66		

## RESULTS

### Stability

We had two questions: (1) How does membership in campus organizations vary over time? (2) What are the characteristics of the campus organizations that have the most longevity? To begin to answer our questions, we first found a general count of students participating in organizations for each organizational category. In Table 2, we detail summary statistics for our findings by including two additional classifications: Howard-only organizations, organizations that exclusively exist at Howard University, and national or international organizations. All Pan-Hellenic were national, and all state and regional and student councils and university-wide were Howard-only. Based on a yearly count of student organizations, among Howard-only organizations, student councils, social, and state and regional generally had the highest number of organizations. Among national organizations, social, academic, and professional were the most numerous.

To examine stability in terms of organization size, we computed the mean number of students for every organization type for each academic year and found their respective standard deviations. The measure of means and standard deviations provided a general idea of how the number of students in each group was distributed about its mean over all the years. Table 2 summarizes these results.

**Table 2. Type of organization, means, and standard deviations by number of students.**

<b>Organization Type</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. Dev.</b>
Academic and Professional (HU).....	14.79.....	5.11
Academic and Professional (National) .....	14.47.....	6.80
Honors (HU) .....	15.18.....	10.03
Honors (National).....	28.58.....	33.12
Pan-Hellenic .....	15.67.....	6.21
Political (HU) .....	11.40.....	6.06
Political (National).....	34.35.....	16.12
Religious (HU) .....	17.57.....	5.91
Religious (National).....	12.00.....	6.35
Social (HU) .....	14.61.....	5.33
Social (National).....	10.26.....	3.54
State and Regional (HU).....	15.94.....	3.99
Student Councils (HU) .....	14.79.....	5.11

*Note: HU denotes Howard University-only organizations, and National denotes national or international organizations.*

National social, Howard-only political, and national religious organizations had the lowest mean number of members per organization. More interestingly, national social groups had a low standard deviation in addition to having a relatively small number of members. This result is surprising for two reasons. The first reason is that there was an overall increase in the number of national social groups, starting from 1 in 1989 to 19 in 2009. Usually, increasing the number of groups makes the average number of students per group more deviant, yet this standard deviation is small. The second reason is that social groups are expected to be more variable in that social preferences change often. In this case, however, changing social preferences do not significantly affect the average number of students per group and its variability, implying that national social groups are the most stable in terms of the number of students.

On the other hand, national political organizations and national honors organizations by far had the highest average number of student members of any other category. As with Howard-only political organizations, national political organizations had a small number of organizations among them. These types of organizations had two or fewer groups for eleven out of the sixteen years in existence. Honors organizations had a more surprising result in terms of the standard deviations for student members. One would expect honors organizations to have less variability due to the GPA requirements needed to become and remain a member. Yet, surprisingly, national honors organizations had a high average number of members and standard deviation relative to the remainder of the groups, suggesting that the number of members in these groups is larger and more volatile relative to the other groups. Because of the high variability in these organizations, national honors organizations tended to be unstable in terms of the number of students.

**Longevity**

To examine stability in terms of longevity, we explored the maximum number of years that each organization existed and averaged across organizational type. Organizational types that existed longer on average had small standard deviations with respect to their means and appeared to be more stable than groups existing for shorter amounts of time with higher standard deviations. Table 3 summarizes these results.

**Table 3. Type of organization and years in existence.**

Organization Type	Mean	Std. Dev.
Academic and Professional (HU).....	1.63.....	1.16
Academic and Professional (National) .....	2.88.....	2.67
Honors (HU) .....	8.90.....	4.68
Honors (National).....	2.80.....	2.05
Pan-Hellenic .....	3.92.....	4.48
Political (HU) .....	4.00.....	
Political (National).....	5.33.....	5.39
Religious (HU) .....	3.11.....	3.00
Religious (National).....	1.45.....	0.82
Social (HU) .....	2.48.....	2.44
Social (National).....	2.80.....	2.57
State and Regional (HU).....	3.37.....	3.27
Student Councils (HU) .....	4.00.....	4.21

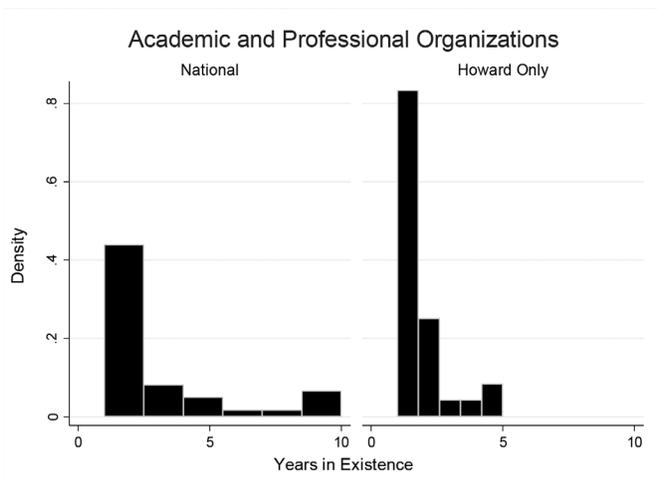
Note: HU denotes Howard University-only organizations, and National denotes national or international organizations.

Of the organizational types with the smallest number of years in existence, national religious organizations and Howard-only academic and professional organizations had the fewest number, suggesting that these organizations tended to exist for short periods continually. Since the religious organizations had a smaller relative standard deviation and were practically driven by one organization, the least stable of the two were the Howard-only academic and professional organizations. This result can be explained by the perpetual change in student academic preferences over the years. Also, Howard-only social groups existed for short periods with a high standard deviation. This result was expected, however, since student social preferences usually changed from year to year, and these organizations lacked a national presence.

The organizational type with the most average years in existence was the Pan-Hellenic organizations. These organizations persisted for 8.9 years, on average, much longer than the other organizations. Pan-Hellenic organizations also had a relatively low standard deviation compared to the mean, so Pan-Hellenic organizations were generally stable.

To further analyze longevity, we provide a discrete distribution, which gives the density of organizations by the number of years in continual existence. These distributions show how continual existence varies by organizational type at Howard University. This information provides more details than the means. Figures 1-8 summarize these findings.

**Figure 1. Distribution of years in existence for academic and professional organizations.**



As shown in Figure 1, all of the Howard-only academic and professional organizations have lasted no more than five years continually, with the organizations distributed between one and five years. Nationally, academic and professional organizations also tended to exist continually for less than five years. However, several of these organizations have lasted longer than five years.

**Figure 2. Distribution of years in existence for honors organizations.**



Figure 2 shows years in existence for honors organizations. Howard-only and national honors organizations have stark differences in terms of years in existence. National honors organizations are distributed across the entire range of years, mostly existing for fewer than five years continually. On the other hand, Howard-only honors organizations have all existed for five or fewer years continually on average. The national foundation of national honors organizations may allow them to exist longer than similar Howard-only organizations.

**Figure 3. Distribution of years in existence for Pan-Hellenic organizations.**

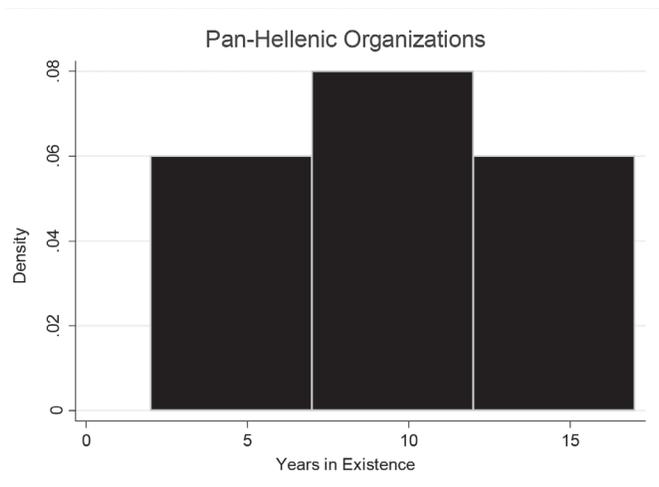
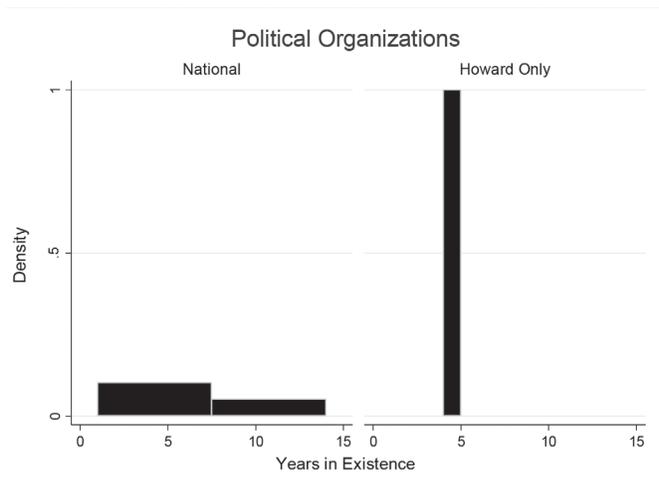


Figure 3 shows that Pan-Hellenic organizations were very evenly distributed around ten years in existence, with the highest density around ten continual years of existence. These types of organizations also had the most continual years in existence overall, further suggesting that these types of organizations are most stable on a year to year basis.

**Figure 4. Distribution of years in existence for political organizations.**



There is a stark difference in the distribution of political organizations, as shown in Figure 4. We observe an even distribution in National political organizations, but Howard-only political organizations are distributed around four years in existence, which demonstrates their instability. However, the lack of organizations under the Howard-only political type drives this finding.

**Figure 5. Distribution of years in existence for religious organizations.**

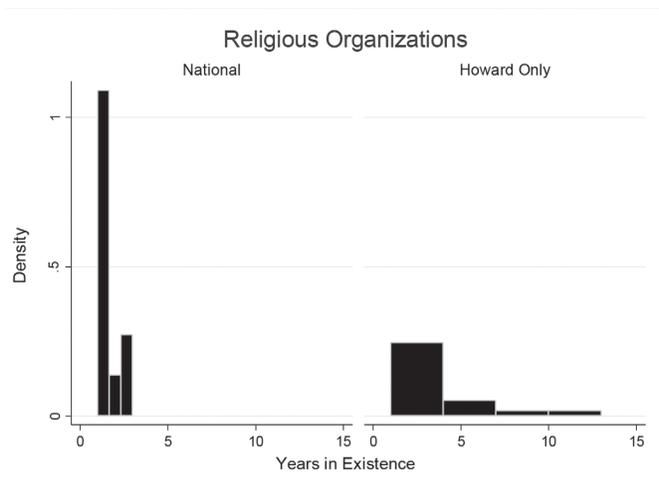


Figure 5 shows that among religious organizations, national organizations had a distribution below five years in existence, and Howard-only organizations had a distribution predominately below five years, which contradicts the trend that national organizations tend to last longer continually. The lack of organizations under the national religious organizational type again explains the low levels of continual years in existence.

**Figure 6. Distribution of years in existence for social organizations.**

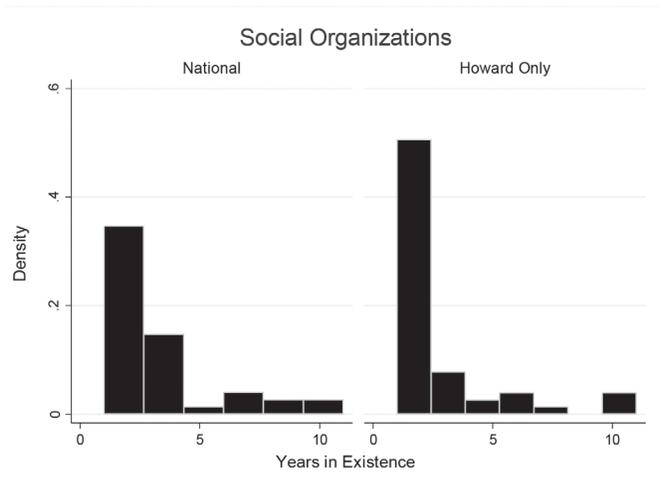


Figure 6 shows that for both national and Howard-only social groups. Many of these organizations lasted less than five years continually, with a few exceptions. National social organizations had a more even distribution when compared to Howard-only social organizations, and Howard-only organizations had a split in their distribution where organizations either lasted longer continually or not long at all.

**Figure 7. Distribution of years in existence for university-wide organizations.**

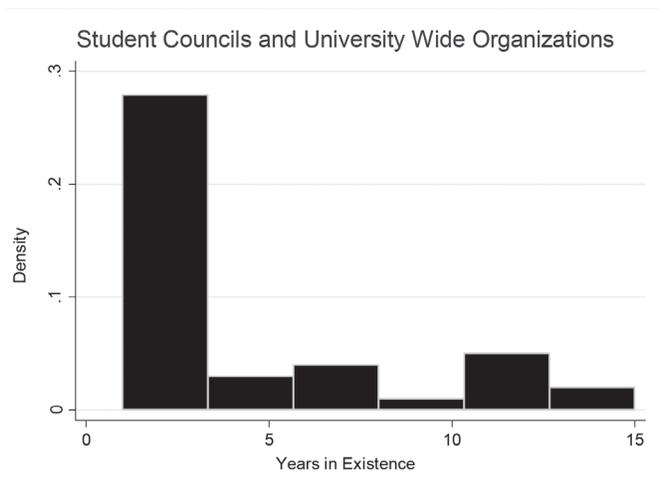


Figure 7 shows that many student councils and university-wide organizations lasted less than five years. This result is surprising because student councils generally are based on campus-wide participation and are essential for the shared governance of the university, suggesting that this type of organization should last longer on average.

**Figure 8. Distribution of years in existence for state and regional organizations.**

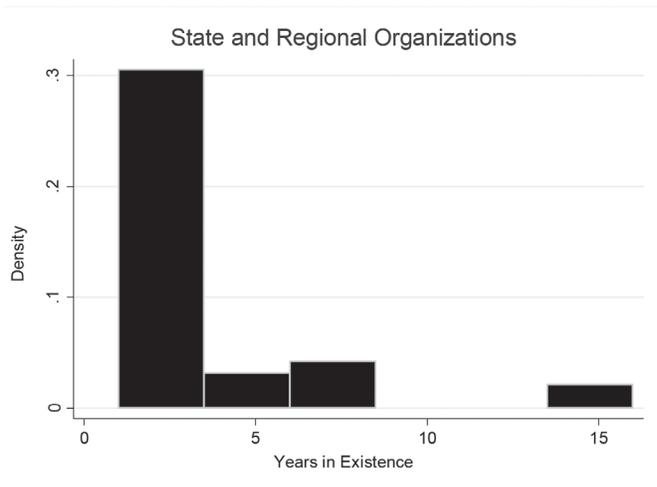


Figure 8 shows that state and regional organizations had a split distribution similar to that of student councils and university-wide organizations, with the difference being that state and regional organizations had a higher proportion of organizations at the bottom of the distribution.

## CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

This research develops a comprehensive data set of student organizations for a premier Historically Black University. In contrast to the literature on student organizations that typically focuses on student outcomes, we utilize this data to perform a comprehensive analysis of the stability of student organizations to highlight the types of student organizations that are the most stable. Thus, the results of this study can inform future research and administrators and students, making student organizational decisions. In terms of student numbers, the most stable organizations were the national social groups. These groups had a very low standard deviation relative to their mean compared to the other categories, which was a surprising result. We also found that in terms of longevity, Pan-Hellenic organizations were the most stable. Pan-Hellenic organizations not only had a high number of continual years in existence but were also evenly distributed throughout all organizations.

While this article addresses the stability of student organizations, it does not attempt to explain the evolution of individual student organizations over time. Determining why an organization changes would allow us to conclude the behavior of individuals within each organization. However, this article provides a broader analysis of student organizations to provide information that can be useful for students and administrators in making decisions about organizations on campus. For an administrator whose priority is to increase student academic performance through an honors organization, we found that national honors organizations tend to be more stable based on the number of members as well as years in existence. Comparatively, if an administrator's priority is to increase the number of religious organizations, university-level student religious organizations tend to be more stable when compared to national level student organizations.

This article presented a rich data set, and this data includes information on student gender, age, college major, college grade point average, high school grade point average, course enrollment, etc. The analysis presented can be easily extended to discuss the relationship between student organizations and academic performance. Unlike prior studies that have focused on social integration, participation in student organizations is less likely to be driven by racial integration. Given that the data set discussed is a panel that follows thousands of undergraduates as they matriculate through college, this data is also ideal for time-to-event analysis. Although there are some limitations to the data as economic variables and post-graduation outcomes are unavailable.

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