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Circle K: Not the Gas Station

Slushies, Hotdogs & Gas...when someone says “Circle K,” those are the first things that come to mind. Some college students think of service, leadership, and fellowship. Circle K International was founded in 1936 as a fraternity house at Washington State University. In 1947, the first official club model was chartered at Carthage College in Illinois. (Circle K International). Since then, the organization has expanded to over 400 clubs worldwide, including Colombia, Europe, and Canada. Circle K has different levels at the international level, state/district level, and club level. Each level has a different focus. For instance, day-to-day service projects of the organization happen at the club level. In contrast, the higher up into the organization, the more the overall picture and future-focused it gets. Although each group has different focuses, they all unite for one mission: “Developing college and university students into a global network of responsible citizens and leaders with a lifelong commitment to service.”

While there has been much research on what makes a discourse community in general, moderate research has been done about the discourse in community engagement in the university setting. Little to no research has been done regarding the scaffolding of learning for the development of leadership at higher levels of a student organization. From the prior research on community engagement at the university level, the *Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning* through the University of Michigan investigated how the university engages in service-learning and the impact and understanding of students, and the effect it has on the

community. In their article, "Campus and Community Partnerships Assessing Impacts & Strengthening Connections," Andrea Vernon and Kelly Ward from the University of Montana found that the three most significant themes were (1) Communities have overwhelmingly positive perceptions of campuses in their area; (2) there are both challenges and benefits to working with service-learning students; and (3) agency personnel seek more coordination and community with those from campus with whom they work (32). In addition to the themes, it was found that campuses need to identify innovative ways to increase awareness of community organizations among students to make various ways for students to get involved (Vernon & Ward 35). Overall, the source identifies the advantages and disadvantages of service-learning and university and students' connection to the community.

Another source from the journal takes the perspective on the skills and benefits students gain from Community Based Learning (CBL). According to Danielle Lake, Aaron Lowen et al.; found that responses indicated that students who participated in the community-based learning had an increased understanding of the community, improved ability to identify the source of a problem, and create plans to address these problems (2021). Through the evaluation and impact of CBL, the results show how students can use community service to learn. With more of the prior research being about service-learning, as mentioned above, not much research has not been found about the knowledge that can be done leadership-wise in a specific club or group to maximize the enculturation process of the discourse community.

Since research is missing on learning development in higher-level areas of an international organization, specifically Circle K International. Shortcomings in the organizations have been found in how Circle K members learn and internalize the higher levels and if current methods are effective for the majority of the membership. The research conducted is to increase

the awareness of the current methods of enculturation and their shortcomings. This will help understand how members understand become enculturated into the discourse community. The following research questions were considered while conducting research:

1. Do the current methods of enculturation effective?
2. How do members understand the complex levels of the higher levels (district or international level) of Circle K?

To answer these questions, research was conducted through interviews and observations of events happening at all three levels of the organization. The interviews were taken with members of the organization at each level of the organization. The first observation was a District Governor and Administrator Conference where Circle K staff trained the incoming District Governors on how to perform their duties as District Governors and effectively help individual clubs. Another observation took place at the club level of Circle K International at a couple of meetings hosted at the University of Cincinnati Circle K club. The final observation took place on a zoom call celebrating and promoting Circle K International with high school students called Key Club Senior Night.

Ultimately, Circle K International is a discourse community about serving others worldwide. Discourse communities are defined as "groups that have goals or purposes and use communication to achieve their goals" (Swales, "Reflections" 2). Additionally, Swales, through "The Concept of Discourse Community" from *Genre Analysis: English in Academic and Research Settings* and "Reflections on the Concept of Discourse Community," identifies eight criteria a group must meet to be considered a discourse community. Swales's first six criteria can be found in "The Concept of Discourse Community," and the last two can be found in "Reflections on the Concept of Discourse Community." Through specific examples through

different levels of the organization, Circle K International meets all eight criteria. Circle K meets the criteria in the following ways:

1. Public goals of the organization have been established on the website of circlek.org in the form of the mission of “Developing college and university students into a global network of responsible citizens and leaders with a lifelong commitment to service.” In addition, three tenants are heavily advertised through the organization: Service, Leadership, and Fellowship (Swales criterion 1) (*Genre Analysis 24*).
2. Club level, regular meetings are hosted, and communication are sent out at each club's discretion. Email updates are sent out to members regularly. International and District levels are monthly emails that get sent out (Swales criterion 2) (*Genre Analysis 25*).
3. Different feedback methods ensure that member feedback is heard. There is a monthly report form that clubs feel out of at the district level, and there are custom questions the district level can utilize to gain feedback. At the international level, surveys are sent out to gain feedback about improvements that can be made (Swales criterion 3) (*Genre Analysis 26*).
4. Many different genres are used for meetings, banquets, conventions, and service projects to conduct business with the organization. There are two district events two times a year, a more social event and a convention two times a year. At the same time, they were having meetings to conduct official district business. Once a year, the international level hosts a convention with educational workshops,

seminars, fellowship events, and elections (Swales criterion 4) (*Genre Analysis* 26).

5. The lexis of Circle K is very complex. More acronyms can be counted. For example, for conventions, district convention Circle K shortens down to DCON. We call it ICON for an International Convention. Even for positions, Lieutenant Governor=LTG. Only things apply to Circle K. For example, Governor's & Administrator Conference training is GATC. Many languages are specific to the Circle K world (Swales criterion 5) (*Genre Analysis* 26).
6. There are different levels of leadership. At those different levels, there are other positions and expertise. At the highest level of knowledge, you have the international president who helps chart the course for the organization. Then you have the club member who isn't aware of everything, just doing service because they do it or need service hours for a scholarship. There are precise levels of expertise and knowledge (Swales criterion 6) (*Genre Analysis* 27).
7. Silent Relations is used in many different ways. One example is an inside joke about the international president and how he smiles. Another way is through the lexis used as many use the word run for the physical activity in Circle K run is used in the meaning of running for a particular position (Swales criterion 7) ("Reflections" 9).
8. At each level, some traditions and expectations show good work. On the district level, you can see if a district board is doing good work because they engage with the state clubs, fundraising, and fellowship events. Some expectations show the quality of work at the different levels. There are awards for clubs at the

international and district to recognize the hard work achieved. (Swales criterion 8) ("Reflections" 9).

With all eight criteria met for a discourse community, a deeper look into the community of Circle K was taken to determine how members of the organization learn, internalize and understand the workings at the higher levels of Circle K, ultimately leading to the true enculturation of a club member into the discourse community of Circle K. The three methods of enculturation that were found were mentorship, expanding on previous experience, and written information.

The first method of enculturation used is mentorship. James Gee studied how, during the enculturation process, "Discourses are not mastered by overt instruction (even less so than languages, and hardly anyone ever fluently acquired a second language sitting in a classroom), but by enculturation ("apprenticeship") into social practices through scaffolded and supported interaction with people who have already mastered the Discourse" (Cazden, 1988; Heath, 1983 qtd. in Gee 7). In terms of Circle K, as new members come into the organization to ensure its sustainability, older members with more expertise serve as mentors to the same level of knowledge. An interview with a district governor of Alabama, Lauren Goodrich, indicated that she had no idea about the district level until someone helped her understand the complex levels. "When I stepped up as vice president, the current district governor took the time with me to explain the acronyms and the significance of the district events. That helped me understand the specific language and events" (Goodrich). The success of the mentorship can vary, while mentorship can be successful. It also can lead to more confusion throughout the organization. Emily Casey, current club president of the University of Cincinnati club, stated, "I had a mentor through the club to help me with all the acronyms. I still feel I was thrown into the Circle K and

was expected to check up and learn about the acronyms at district level" (Casey). As a result, the method of enculturation from the Circle K shows how mentorship can be impacted members while integrating into the community.

The second method of enculturation is previous experience in the high school version of Circle K called Key Club. Circle K is not a stand-alone organization, and it is like the oldest children in a family of service organizations with the overarching organization called Kiwanis. A step below Circle K is called Key Club. Since Key Club has the same levels as Circle K helps students have a smoother transition into the college version. Data from an in-person survey showed that most of the leaders: district governors, and international trustees had been previously involved with the high school version of Circle K called Key Club. One district governor, in particular, had been a district governor in Key Club so adjusting to the Circle K community was easier. "My time in Key Club helped me adjust to all the different things Circle K had to offer, and the acronyms didn't catch me off guard." There are pros and cons of the method because previous experience is helpful. It also can disclude new members with no prior. Overall, this method is essential because it focuses on the previous experience as a factor when it comes to enculturation in any discourse community.

Finally, the last way that enculturation is accomplished is by laying out the information in literature and presentation form. Written resources can incorporate different ways to explain a discourse community's levels and various aspects. From the observation done, an event called Key Club senior night where Circle K members introduced via a PowerPoint what Circle K and started the process of the high school students learning the organization's culture and the higher level complexes. Finally, a member from the New York district, Haleigh Gaston, said the ways

she discovered was a through a booklet created by past district officers to explain the acronyms, the different levels of Circle K to continue the learning, "The what is what booklet, helped me understand the foundations of the district level. The booklet gave me the information I needed to understand Circle K and gave me the information to continue learning" (Gaston). The method is essential because it demonstrates how written resources can assist in the enculturation process.

Research, Interviews, and Observations have all helped implement how Circle K uses different methods to help new members understand the higher levels. The methods of mentorship, previous experience, and written resources help show how the methods, as long as they break the iceberg enforce the scaffolding of learning. The study conducted on Circle K as discourse communities has implications for the concept and literacy of discourse communities because the methods used in enculturation can be implemented in other discourse communities. Ultimately the research and findings can be used to shape and improve other methods of enculturation in multiple level organizations.

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