Does it Matter? What College Student Governments Talk About

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The purpose of the study was to identify student governing bodies' roles for decision-making. Data were collected from 73 student government association (SGA) agendas. Agendas were analyzed by three researchers with each conducting a separate analysis of topics and choices made by student governing bodies. Meetings minutes ranged from 53 minutes to 2 hours and 52 minutes. Prevalent topics discussed or voted upon included allocations for student fees, campus and business life issues, and academic procedures, endorsement of the Dream Act, student voter registration, and state funding for higher education.

There is consistent agreement in both the practice and in the literature of student government that representation by students is important to the operation of the campus and the identity development of students. Through a half-century of implementation, elected student government bodies provide important outlets for students to be engaged in making decisions for the welfare of the entire campus while simultaneously providing an opportunity for students to bargain, negotiate, and advocate for others whom they represent (Laosebikan-Buggs, 2006).

An important element in the way that student government works is the identification of issues, problems, trends, and demands placed on student government representatives. The idea of representative democracy at work in student government is that elected officials, in this case, college students, make decisions that reflect those whom they represent. This idea is the underlying assumption behind representative democracy and is represented in the model of Citizen Demand Making (Sharp, 1984).

In the model of Citizen Demand Making (CDM), both social and political structures exert pressure on formal bodies to articulate a specific interest and response. These articulations can be formal resolutions expressed as student government legislation, or they can be actions expressed through executive actions, memorandum, or the commitment of monies. The model allows for multiple points of interaction, as social bodies are splintered into different factions and can contact and exert pressures on different governing groups, such as faculty and staff senates as well as student senates. Resolutions go through a conflict and compromise process to result in action, although on the highly pluralistic college campus, there are often competing perceptions of what the resolutions actually entail, and to whom the end result

benefits the most (although somewhat dated, the Sharp, 1984 discussion of CDM is still the most comprehensive).

Representative democracies are part of the CDM, and are the process of utilizing smaller groups of people to represent the broad interests of many (Miller, & Barnes, 2004). Elected or appointed officials serve in a formal role as politicians, delegates, and other bureaucratic titles. These individuals typically have shared beliefs among those who elect or appoint them, and carry forward agendas that encourage policies and laws that reflect those beliefs (Rochefort & Cobb, 1994).

The involvement of students in this process has a long history in higher education, as students at the earliest European universities challenged authority and placed demands on the institution. The process has become much more formalized during the past five decades, and today includes an intricate electoral function complete with institutionally sanctioned areas of responsibility. Miles (1997), among other authors (Laosebikan-Buggs, 2006; Brumfield, 2006), indicated that student governance, in practice, is problematic for a variety of reasons, including apathy, disorganization, a self-serving nature, and even self-promotion over service. With such a series of charges, the current study was designed to explore how representative and service-oriented a sample of student government bodies were over a one-year period of time. Although limited in nature, the snapshot of one-year does provide a baseline of information about what student governments are dealing with and how connected with the campus these items are.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

In representative democracies, elected officials are given their opportunities to serve, conceptually, on the basis of their abilities to represent the interests of their constituents (Taylor, 2011). Many representative democracies mirror this grounding, including student governments on college campuses. These student governments both provide a training ground for students to understand how to care for, think about, and steward the interests of others, while also providing a sounding board for administrators and campus policy makers about the welfare of the campus and the student experience. This process, however, frequently encounters difficulties not unlike their counterparts in public office (Laosebikan-Buggs, 2009).

Student governments have encountered issues similar to larger public governing bodies in that they are controlled by special interest groups, financial pressures, and even moral ideologies. One such instance has historically been noted at the University of Alabama where Greek-letter organizations controlled not only the agenda of the student government, but also the personnel running for office (Weis, 1992; Miller, Randall, & Nadler, 1999). The abilities of some students to provide significant financial resources to campaigns has also resulted in regulations being created for student government elections, with violations resulting in the invalidation of votes, the disqualification of candidates, etc.

Despite the problems associated with student government procedures, these student senates have a strong history and rationale for inclusion in the academy during the past half-century. Arising from the student activism of the 1950s and 1960s, student involvement has provided a training platform for students to better understand how democracy works, provides experimentation for students thinking about their role in the citizenry, and they provide key feedback to institutional policy makers and leaders about how the institution of higher education is working (Mackey, 2006). Student representation has been key to conveying how the institution responds to leaders and trustees, and often, student voices are so valued that they are allowed a seat with trustees.

Student governments typically incorporate the nature of their structure into their title, commonly holding a title such as a student government association or the associated students of a particular university. Similarly, they have mission and purpose statements that reflect a principle of democracy, such as the University of Colorado's student government (CUSG) that "serves as a liaison between the student body and university administration" (CUSG, ¶ 1). Southern Illinois University's Undergraduate Student Government has a similar mission statement that reads "[USG] represents the undergraduate student body…in all matters pertaining to student welfare, student activities, and student life. USG also voices the concerns of students in the planning and administration of the university at large" (USG, 1-2).

There have been inconsistent reports on the value and importance of student governance bodies, where some scholars have found a lack of self-importance of the student government body work (Jones, 1983; Taylor, 2015) ranging to student government presidents perceptions of a high degree of importance (Jones, 1983). Jones' research also indicated that faculty senate presidents did not perceive the work of student government to be important to the welfare of the campus.

Additional research on collegiate student government bodies has revealed a tremendous pressure and stress placed on students who are elected to leadership positions (May, 2009), that elected leaders are often highly involved across multiple student organizations (Sessa, 1990), and the need for political negotiation skills that include compromise and moderation of beliefs (Sessa, 1990). There are several associations of student governments that provide support for the work of these bodies, with some states or higher education systems organizing regular meetings of student government leaders. There is also the American Student Government Association that reports over 1,300 member institutions, and through conferences, workshops, and sharing resources, provide support for how student governments are established and operate as well as training for both elected representatives and professional advisors (for a description of their programs and services, see www.asgaonline.com).

Research has generally shown that involvement in co-curricular activities in college aids in personal development, academic success, and collegiate satisfaction (Astin, 1984; Montelongo, 2002), although much of this research is not specific to involvement with student government. Similarly, policy related research has bearing on student government, but has not been directly tested on these representative democracies. Of the likely outcomes associated with policy considerations, agenda setting, that is, the process of determining what will and will not be considered in the student government, is critical to consider (Dearing & Rogers, 1996).

Agenda setting is a process of determining what issues are considered by a legislative group, who has the right and ability to set that agenda, and ultimately, what actions can and will be taken. An example of this could be the role of the student government advisor who can observe or actively participate in setting and determining agenda items. What this person deems important can become important for the legislative body to consider; conversely, the culture of the body might be such that it is adversarial in nature, and will work to challenge authority through the institution.

Student governments do suffer from the restraints of term limits and the influence of other special interests, whether they are voting blocks such as Greek-letter organizations, administrators, or those with a particular focus or special interest, such as religious organizations. Due to graduation, other student engagement opportunities, or exhaustion from participation, student government associations also deal annually with substantial losses of knowledgeable elected leaders and significant transition issues. These losses are even more consequential when replacing the graduating seniors who have participated in student government from their freshman year through degree competition. This is of consequence because those with experience in participation are knowledgeable about the student government governing documents, student government mission, and the greater university policy goals and processes. These experiences and the collegial relationships that come with experience allow these participants to be active and productive contributors in the governing process.

This study provides a unique, national perspective on what agendas are in place in student government, and has the potential to offer both a deeper insight into how agendas are set, and plausibly, who might control these agendas. These results are crucial to student affairs leaders, those interested in higher education as a training ground for democratic citizenship, and those who believe in the student development function of attending college that forces students to face growth opportunities.

RESEARCH METHODS

Ten institutions were selected for inclusion in the study (see Appendix A). These institutions were selected based on several criteria: a formally recognized student government body that includes elected representatives into a branch of government such as a senate; geographic representation, with each region of the United States included; a full posting of meeting minutes for the entire 2014-2015 academic year

(or similarly titled documents sometimes referred to as journals or results); and the availability of additional information to the student population on the governing body's website to allow for tracking the actions of the governing body after the meeting. To identify the 10 institutions, a total of 83 institutional websites were researched, with the 73 institutions not used having incomplete meeting minute postings, no minutes recorded, no student government website referencing, or similar incomplete or inconsistent records presented to the institution's students.

For the institutions selected for inclusion in the study, each individual student government body's website was identified and agendas and meeting minutes were identified and printed for analysis. The decision was made to include both the agenda that had been developed prior to the meeting as well as the actual items covered once the meeting began. The analysis of content was conducted individually by all three researchers, and then the three researchers consulted on their independently developed themes and worked to develop consensus on the topics they identified. This cross-analysis reporting also aided in the reliability of topic identification.

There were several key limitations to the study, including the limited timeframe of the meetings (one academic year), the inconsistency of what was recorded in meeting minutes, and differences in formatting and referencing topics. Some meeting agendas, for example, referred to presented legislation by a bill number, some by a senator's name, and others by a topic. In the case of inconsistent naming of legislation, every attempt was made to review the student government's website or email them directly to identify the content of the legislation. Discussions and debate about legislation similarly ranged from referencing 'heated discussion' to specific remarks about the advantages and disadvantages of a particular bill to transcripts of actual debates. Another limitation was the consistency of minutes or journals posted on student government websites, with some providing clearly labeled and referenced meetings by date, while others presented years posted together and others posted meetings by month. Only institutions with an entire year's worth of meeting minutes were included in the study.

FINDINGS

In the data analysis, 141 meeting minutes were reviewed, and the level of detail varied greatly from summative statements about "debate was held to consider the motion," to detailed comments on which a senator said specific comments about issues. Seven of the minutes also recorded the length of the senate meetings, with average meeting length ranging from :53 minutes to 2:52; the average length of meetings was 1:04. All of the minutes reviewed followed repetitive structures or protocols, generally approving the previous meeting's minutes followed by general announcements, committee reports, and the introduction of legislation for voting. At least two of the senates used an omni-bus approach to passing legislation, allowing senators to remove particular bills, generally funding bills, for discussion if they so desired. If no legislation was removed from the omni-bus approval motion, no debate was recorded and the shortest length of a senate meeting reviewed was three minutes. Conversely, one meeting that featured multiple funding legislation debates lasted over four hours.

The majority of discussion and voting at eight of the ten institutions was centered on allocating student fee monies for different programs. These programs ranged from sending undergraduate students to leadership development conferences and hosting speakers on campus to social programs that included inter-residence hall mixers and dances. A broad spectrum of additional discussion items and votes were also made on legislation that related to four different aspects of the senate's responsibility: campus life and business issues, academic procedures, social issues, and self-government regulation (see Appendix B).

Fourteen different votes were made across the sample institutions about campus life and business issues, and these generally related to the welfare of the student on campus. Asking facilities to expand walking trails, clarifying the inclement weather policy, and providing safe, reliable transportation for students late at night were all voted on and passed. Senates also took responsibility for a variety of academic issues (n=13), such as approving classes (communications and personal well-being), revising

the liberal arts core, and approving regulations for enrollment in dual-majors and the number of hours a student can enroll in.

Senate members also brought forward legislation that represented broader social issues (n=10), such as endorsing the DREAM Act, registering students to vote, and supporting the state's funding model for higher education. Fewer pieces of legislation were introduced for self-government regulation (n=6), and included issues such as annual election protocol (candidate registration dates, voting dates, polling locations, campaign funding, etc.) and revisions to the operating by-laws of the senate.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Overall, the student governments identified in the study took on meaningful issues that potentially impact the lives of students on campus. The issues were substantive and meaningful, and generally represented mature thinking about problems students face on campus, such as what kinds of material should be covered in a general education curriculum and how many credit hours a student can enroll in. Similarly, though, there were issues that seemed related to student life and perhaps carry some real concern among student government leaders, but might not truly share the importance of curricular content. Passed legislation on promoting school spirit at football games and endorsing an athletic logo do have a place in student life, but the inclusion of them does reflect the complexity of issues student governments address.

The considerable amount of time spent on student organization and activity funding represented more of a policy problem for student governments. These bodies, collectively spent the majority of their time debating (arguing) about who should get money to conduct which types of programs, with particularly partisan debates related to special interest groups that had moral dimensions, such as religious organizations. The need to individually debate these funding bills represents a lack of policy protocol for equitable decision-making, meaning, that if stronger policy were in place, funding would be less individualized and perhaps decisions would be made in a more fair and equitable manner, and without the time commitment reflected in these meeting minutes.

Study findings do allude to different kinds of student government bodies at work. Some seemed to spend a significant amount of time on funding decisions while others spent their time on more content based decisions. These two activities could represent ends on a spectrum of student governments with a vertical axis representing involvement levels. Such a depiction would be helpful in understanding where student governments invest their time, energy, and resources, and also reflect the level of involvement by students. The governments represented in the study had an average voter turnout of 17.83%, which was about consistent with previous research for student voting turnout. The range of turnout, however, did represent a much broader spectrum of involvement, with Georgia State University, an urban institution, reporting a 5.45% turnout and Northwestern University, another urban institution, reporting a 34.98% turnout.

Perhaps the most startling element of the study was the lack of transparency of the 73 student governments which did not report minutes, agendas, current rosters of membership, listings of legislation, or public reports of funding decisions. This relative poor management of governing bodies tends to be the opposite of what many students and faculty call for in an openness of decision making. Even the 10 student governments included in the study generally failed to provide a level of detail that would satisfy student inquiries.

The current study provides an initial framework for exploring what student governments consider to be important, and future research needs to bring these agenda items into focus as compared to what students are talking about or are concerned about on their campuses. An effort to triangulate student government actions with campus newspaper headlines, for example, might provide a good reflection as to whether student demands are being considered in student government business, and this in turn could validate, or not, the applicability of citizen demand making. Other future research might include interviews with student government leaders about what did not make it onto student government body agendas and how the concept of agenda setting is structured within these bodies.

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APPENDIX A
INSTITUTIONS SELECTED FOR INCLUSION

Institution	Voter Turnout	Undergraduate Enrollment	Percent
Central Washington University	1,572	10,300	15.26
Clemson University	6,056	17,585	34.43
Georgia State University	1,307	23,961	5.45
Idaho State University	1,306	9,983	13.08
New Mexico State University	1,602	14,698	10.89
Northwestern University	2,991	8,549	34.98
Rice University	1,610	5,339	30.15
SUNY at Albany	945	12,950	7.29
University of Connecticut	3,140	18,395	17.06
University of Northern Iowa	1,189	12,159	9.77

APPENDIX B
LISTING OF PRIMARY LEGISLATIVE ITEMS

Topic

Campus Life and Business Issues
On campus smoking
Late night taxi vouchers
Extended public transportation hours
Walking trails
Inclement weather policy
Enhancing school spirit
Scholarship eligibility and enrollment
Endorsing the athletic logo
Glass bottle recycling on campus
Encouraging community service
Eliminating paper flyers
Creating a tobacco free campus
Creating an open-place for demonstrations
Programming on preventing sexual assault

Academic Procedures Issues
New technology fees
Number of classes allowed for enrollment
Economics department advisory committee
New oral communications class
New personal well-being class
Academic calendar
Career track for non-tenure-track faculty

Open source textbooks
Revising the liberal arts core
TOFEL score revisions
Free scantrons and blue books for students
Dual and multiple major regulations
Modification of the student handbook

Social Issues
Increasing voter registration
Support of the DREAM Act
Voter registration for students
Capitol lobby day
Promoting diversity/multiculturalism
Increasing institutional access for low-income students
Allowing a Palestinian student organization
Recognition of a religious student organization
Supporting the state's performance based funding
Assisting a food recovery program

Self-Government Issues
Off-campus student voting
Student leadership development
Student government campaign regulations
Office hours for student government leaders at branch campuses
Student government election protocol
Senate by-law revisions

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