A National Study of Improving Participation in Student Self-Governance Leadership

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Student governance has often been described as one of the most difficult components of the student affairs division effectively utilize. This difficulty can arise from student group dominance of the governance body, as was the case at the University of Alabama about a decade ago (Weis, 1992), or it can arise from uncertain or unclear expectations of various roles (Bambenek & Sifton, 2003). Further, as with faculty governance, participation can be a major barrier to student governance bodies working effectively (Miles, 1997). The lack of participation in student governance has been so problematic that some institutions have dissolved their student governance bodies and other institutions have had to develop payment plans (stipends) to get students to stand for election. This has led many administrators to question the validity of sharing governance with students, and has called into question the current structure of many governance bodies.

Student governance in its best form is more than a representation of student interests to a division of student affairs, the most typical administrative oversight body for such governance units. Student governance can play an important part in the overall institutional decision-making process, and can include academic and administrative interests as well as those typically identified with student affairs, such as fee allocation proceedings and judicial hearings. Student self-governance can be a powerful force in representing student interests to senior administrators and faculty, and as such, needs to be seen from the larger institutional vantage point (Miller, 2003; Hodgkinson & Meeth, 1971).

Student governance also has the potential to positively impact the growth and development of college students. This positive impact can be tied to both the general benefits of involvement (Kuh & Lund, 1994), and the more specific benefits tied to representing the interests of others and assuming leadership positions on campus. Regardless of the potency of student governing body power, the involvement of students in governance-related activities is a positive element of college participation.

The purpose for conducting the study was to identify strategies that can be put into place to increase participation in student self-governance activities. Specifically, the study was designed to identify and describe the strategies most likely to increase participation at three different types of institutions, research universities, regional colleges, and private liberal arts colleges, and to compare these ratings to better understand student behaviors and expectations. Study findings can yield important information for student affairs professionals and higher education administrators in general about how to encourage participation, and can be of assistance to student government leaders who often struggle to fill key appointments and muster the support and activity of fellow students.

The Trouble with Shared Governance

Shared governance has been a difficult concept for the contemporary university to embrace and use well. Early problems with shared governance resulted in the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) establishing a committee to develop a statement on the types of issues and areas in which there should be broad based, inclusive decision making (AAUP, 1966). Their 1966 statement, which was designed to serve as a template for institutions, relegated faculty rights to seemingly traditional academic areas. Student participation in such governance activities was excluded from the statement.

Throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s, student empowerment was claimed through activism and institutional policy change. The elimination of *in loco parentis* opened opportunities for students to claim greater responsibility for their own behaviors, and led ultimately to their inclusion in the more formalized governance structure of the university, including non-voting seats on governing boards (Hodgkinson, 1971).

Shared governance, however, has never worked in an ideal fashion, despite anecdotal commentary suggesting otherwise (Baldridge, 1982). Shared governance, including a dissipated process of decision-making, collaboration, and input, can be slow, ill-informed, and can lack the

fortitude at times necessary to address substantial institutional problems (Evans, 1999). Conversely, shared governance can effect an institution's willingness to embrace difficult decisions and can lead to the creation of more and perhaps more innovative approaches to problem solving (Evans, 1999).

For governance structures that involve college students, there are a host of additional challenges beyond the typical questions about representative democracy. These include questioning about student qualifications by faculty and administrators, the temporal nature of college students, questions about student maturity and responsibility to make large-scale decisions, and problems associated with special interest group control of governing bodies. These challenges are not unique to most collections of college students, however, as many of the same questions can be asked of contemporary faculty and administrators. The typical college president is in place for five to seven years (Sibley, 1998), faculty often focus their interests in narrow, highly specialized fields and fail to consider larger institutional concerns, and there are very similar questions about the qualifications of faculty to make informed and responsible decisions outside of their areas of expertise. The result has become a combination of reluctance toward student participation in governance, and a belief that it is something that is necessary for the welfare of the institution. Largely, however, most institutions have decided that shared governance with students is at least partially a necessity and is something to be pursued. If institutions are to pursue student self-governance, then they need to identify best practices and strategies to build inclusive bodies with the most capable student leaders and high levels of participation. As such, the current study has importance and significance to institutional leaders in addition to those in student affairs, as the welfare of higher education is tied to sharing responsibility for the future.

Research Methods

As an exploratory study, data were through a survey instrument that was adapted from (Miles, 1997) Delphi-technique survey. The instrument contained 18 items, including three demographic questions and 15 strategies for increasing student participation in governance activities. The 15 strategies were drawn from Miles research that included the consensus of 30 student governance body leaders. The adapted instrument was field tested with a group of college students at an institution not included in the data collection. The field test produced seven instances of wording changes for clarity. The revised survey was then sent to a group of 35 randomly selected students at a research university, and an internal reliability alpha of .669 was identified and determined to be reliable for the current study.

For each of the 15 strategies, college students were asked to rate their level of agreement that the strategy would successfully increase student participation in governance. Agreement was measured on a Likert-type scale, with 1=Strong Disagreement, 2=Disagreement, 3=Uncertain, 4=Agreement, and 5=Strong Agreement that the strategy would result in increased levels of student participation in shared governance.

The sample was randomly selected from nine colleges and universities that were randomly identified using the 2004 Higher Education Directory (Burke, 2004). Three public, research focused universities (land grant universities), three public comprehensive universities (regional), and three private liberal arts colleges were all identified (see Table 1). These institutions were identified to gain a broad understanding of student perceptions, and also to allow for the different types of student governance bodies often in place at different types of institutions.

An email was sent to each senior student affairs officer and a contact person at each campus was identified. A total of 75 surveys were then mailed to each campus contact person, and the surveys were randomly distributed to students on the same day in the fall of 2005 in each

campuses student center or union. The intent was to obtain 50 completed surveys from each institution, and 25 additional surveys were included to account for the return of non-usable surveys. In instances where more than 50 surveys were completed and determined to be usable, the first 50 were used in data analysis.

All surveys were distributed by one or two volunteer students on each campus who were identified by the senior student affairs officer. These students distributed the surveys and the pencil-and-paper surveys were completed and placed anonymously in a sealed box. Each box was then mailed to the principal investigator for data entry.

Findings

All respondent collection boxes were received in October 2005. The first 50 completed surveys were extracted from each box and the remainder were discarded. Of the 450 surveys used in analysis, 260 (59%) indicated that they were female, as compared to 179 (40% of completed responses) male (see Table 2). The majority of respondents classified themselves as holding the standing of a junior (n=124; 31%), with the fewest indicating that they were first year students (n=36; 9%).

As a combined group (see Table 2), respondents agreed most strongly that establishing a relationship between the student governance and student organizations (mean 4.31) would produce greater levels of student involvement in governance activities. They also agreed that the strategies of giving students a feeling of ownership (mean 4.25), encouraging new student involvement through demonstrating past accomplishments (mean 4.15) and administrators showing respect for student governments (mean 4.15) could produce increased involvement. Conversely, the combined group provided the lowest ratings to the strategies of demonstrating student government effectiveness so others will want to join (mean 3.86) and provide a consistent time and location for student government meetings (mean 3.74).

Stratified by institutional type, there was consistency among the ratings of students from research and comprehensive universities and private liberal arts colleges. Research university students agreed most strongly with establishing a relationship between the student government and student organizations (mean 4.50), giving students a feeling of ownership (mean 4.21), encouraging new student involvement through demonstrating past accomplishments and administrators respecting student government decisions (both mean 4.20). As shown in Table 2, students from the regional comprehensive universities had the same three strategies with the highest mean ratings, followed by increasing student representation on faculty and staff committees (mean 4.11). Private liberal arts college students similarly had the highest overall mean ratings for the strategies of relationship building and giving students a feeling of ownership, but also gave the highest overall rating to the strategy of being visible to first-year students (mean 4.55). Private liberal arts college students had the same strategy along with research university students with the lowest overall mean rating, provide a consistent time and location for student government meetings (mean 3.75 for liberal arts students, 3.60 for research university students). Students from the regional comprehensive colleges had a lowest overall mean rating for the strategy of publicize student government meetings and activities (mean 3.50).

An analysis of variance procedure (ANOVA) was then used to determine if there were any significant differences between the overall mean ratings by institutional type. Using a .05 level of significance, statistically significant differences were identified for three strategies. The mean rating of research university students was significantly higher than that of comprehensive regional university students for the strategy of establishing a relationship between the student government and student organizations and between those same two groups and the strategy of publicizing student government meetings and activities. Private liberal arts college students were identified as having a statistically significant higher overall mean rating of the strategy being visible to first year students than both other groups of students.

Discussion

Findings from the data collection illustrate that there is indeed some consensus concerning strategies for improving the level of participation in shared governance with students. Private college students viewed improving participation levels as perhaps partially tied to knowledge, but also partially tied to creating an immediate expectation for involvement with new students. As with the other two groups of students, all respondents viewed using the student governance body as a form of conduit between itself, the larger student population, and student organizations. They perceived the relationship between the governance body and working with other students and student leaders in other organizations as a key to getting students and student leaders involved.

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Table 1.
Distribution of Sample Institutions.

State	Number of Institutions
Alabama	1
California	2
Illinois	1
Maryland	1
New Mexico	1
Oklahoma	1
Rhode Island	1
Texas	1

Table 2.
Description of Sample Population.
N=450

Characteristic	N	%
Gender		
n=439		
Female	260	59%
Male	179	40
Class Standing		
n=399		
Freshman	36	9
Sophomore	88	22
Junior	124	31
Senior	72	18

Table 3.
Strategies and Techniques for Increasing Student Involvement in Governance.

Strategy/Technique	Resh Mean n=150	Regnl mean n=150	Prvte mean n=150	Overall mean n=450
Establish a relationship between the student government and student organizations	4.50*	4.18*	4.26	4.31*
Give the students a feeling of ownership	4.21	4.25	4.30	4.25
Encourage new student involvement through demonstrating past accomplishments of the student government	4.20	4.09	4.16	4.15
Administrators should respect decisions of student governments	4.20	4.11	4.16	4.15
Be visible to first-year students	3.81*	4.00*	4.55*	4.12*
Create a positive image on campus for the student leaders	4.13	4.06	4.10	4.09
Increase student representation on faculty and staff committees	4.10	4.11	4.00	4.07
Keep the student media involved and interested	4.01	4.03	4.00	4.01
Foster cooperation Between the student gov't and the institution's administration	3.92	3.95	4.01	3.96
Create a student gov't structure which accomplishes	3.90	3.95	3.99	3.94

its goals

Table 2, continued.

Strategies and Techniques for Increasing Student Involvement in Governance

Strategy/Technique	Resh Mean n=150	Regnl mean n=150	Prvte mean n=150		Overall mean n=450	
Emphasize the Importance of the position each student holds		3.88	3.92	4.01		3.93
Make students aware of options and roles available through the student government	4.00	3.90	3.77		3.89	
Publicize student government meetings and activities	4.00*	3.50*	3.99		3.83*	
Demonstrate student government effectiveness so others will want to join	3.76	3.99	3.83		3.86	
(table continues)						
Provide a consistent time and location for student government meetings	3.60		3.88	3.75		3.74

**Statistically significant difference at the .05 level.*