Title

Communication Apprehension Levels of Student Governance Leaders

Authors

Michael T. Miller
Professor, Higher Education
University of Arkansas

Daniel P. Nadler
Vice President for Student Affairs
Eastern Illinois University

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Introduction

College students arrive on their respective campuses with a variety of interests, needs, and aspirations. These students are often channeled into academic majors and treated with tremendous homogeneity in these majors, and subsequently learn to rely and maximize out-of-classroom learning experiences and involvement as a major contributor to their collegiate experience. Students involve themselves in many different ways, from the casual participation in intramural and recreational sports, to serving in elected campus wide leadership positions.

Student involvement in on-campus extra- and co-curricular activities has been linked to greater levels of satisfaction with the college experience along with stronger academic performance. Additionally, students who are actively engaged in campus-sponsored activities historically have given more financially to their institutions as alumni, and are more likely to graduate. The subsequent challenge for institutions as a whole, and for administrators in specific, is to identify the strategies that can most effectively engage students in campus life.

A variety of strategies have been identified to attempt to increase student involvement in campus life, including increased advertising, recruitment during first year or orientation programs, and technologically mediated strategies (email solicitations, blogs, postings, etc.). These approaches have focused on organizations, groups, and the institution at large recruiting students, with little to no regard for the possibility of an individual's inherent resistence to socially-based interactions. The notion of social interaction hesitation has been characterized as communication apprehension.

Communication apprehension, originally known as stage fright in the 1940's, has been defined as "an individual's level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons" (McCroskey, 1977, p. 78). Communication

apprehension (CA) levels can be so severe that an individual's ability to interact becomes tremendously limited, resulting in isolationist desires or behaviors.

Considering the consequences of high levels of CA, the current study was designed to explore the communication apprehension levels of students who are actively involved in campus activities, namely, campus leadership roles defined as participation in campus-wide elections for student government positions.

Background of the Study

There are two dominant domains of literature that have bearing on the current study: communication apprehension and student involvement in governance activities. The body of literature related to communication apprehension is substantial, and for the purpose of clarity, the current review was limited to defining literature.

Communication Apprehension

Communication apprehension (CA) emerged as a field of study originally under the framework of 'stage fright,' and has typically referred to "an individual's level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons" (McCroskey, 1977, p. 78). Communication apprehension and behavior in general has been linked to academic persistence and achievement (Chaffee, 1992; Hunt, Lippert, & Titsworth, 2005), and has specifically been linked to a college student's ability to build social infrastructure necessary for finding success while enrolled in postsecondary education, impacting such interactions as participating in a team, negotiating, resolving conflicts, etc. (Harter, Nelson, Pearson, & Titsworth, 2003).

Conceptually, CA has been linked to both genetic and learned responses to communication (McCroskey, 1977; Caughlin, Daly, & Stafford, 1997; Beatty, McCroskey, &

Heisel, 1998). Those with high levels of CA, meaning those with higher levels of fear or anxiety over communication or anticipated communication, are more likely to be impaired or suffer negative life consequences. These might include inhibited social opportunity, greater social judgments, and personal self and social condition definition (McCroskey, 1983; Caughlin, Daly, & Stafford, 1997).

Within higher education, college students with low CA levels have been found to have a higher likelihood of success (Anderson & McCroskey, 1976; Boothe-Butterfield, McCroskey, & Payne, 1989). Students with high CA levels have been found to have lower overall grade point averages, a greater propensity to drop out, and have been found to lack the coping skills necessary to transition from childhood homes to the complex social environments that typically describe the college campus (McCroskey, 1976; McCroskey & Payne, 1986; Boothe-Butterfield, McCroskey, & Payne, 1989).

The results of these research studies indicate that students with high CA are less likely to be engaged and benefit from that engagement while in college. The current study utilized this understanding of the importance of communication ability to explore involvement through student government.

Student Involvement in Governance

College students are involved in institutional governance activities for a variety of reasons, ranging from career and academic aspirations to highly personal reasons such as a search for a place to fit into a social network. This involvement often results in a number of positive outcomes for the institution, including a greater responsiveness and understanding on the part of 'front-line' consumers (e.g., those closest to the teaching, learning, and living aspects of the college), a cadre of individuals who are highly motivated to improve the collegiate

experience for everyone, and the visibility of the student experience to board members and trustees so that they can see first-hand the impact of the decisions they make (Laosebikan-Buggs, 2006; Manns, 2006; Miller & Nadler, 2006). Additionally, there are many personal benefits that can be derived from participating in student governance, including greater personal self-discipline, a better acceptance of diversity and divergent thinking, a better understanding of complex organizations and democratic ideals, and a highly effective learning laboratory for students to experience the democratic process.

Students who are involved in the college setting also have greater personal benefits in the form of enhanced learning and satisfaction with the collegiate experience (Cooper, Healey, & Simpson, 1994; Kuh & Lund, 1994). Involvement with student governance has also been linked to tightly coupled group behavior that has been linked to both positive and negative actions (Weis, 1992).

Student governance is unique as a form of involvement as it provides an opportunity for service to others, and is designed to be democratic, meaning service to others inherently precedes personal benefit. Although not always realized, this notion of teaching students about representative democracy is both valuable personally and to society as a whole, thus resulting in a high level of value for institutions as educational experience providers. As such, it is particularly important to understand why students choose to participate in student governance (Miles, 1997; Love & Miller, 2003), and to determine if certain personal or academic characteristics might lead, or conversely lead away from, involvement.

Research Methods

To understand the communication apprehension levels of college students engaged in student self-governance activities, a convenience sample of five universities was selected for

inclusion in the data collection. These institutions were comprehensive doctoral institutions, with one located in the western US, one in the southeastern US, and three in the Midwestern US. A total of 250 surveys were sent to these institutions (50 to each institution), and the surveys were administered at student government association (or similarly titled organization) meetings. A total of 226 surveys (90%) were returned for inclusion in data analysis.

The survey instrument was constructed to two elements. The first was a categorically structured demographic response section. Included were questions related to academic major, academic standing, and position held (elected, officer, appointed; assuming a task differential by role). The second section of the survey consisted of the standard and widely accepted Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (version PRCA-24). The 24-item self-report survey instrument was developed in the late-1970s and consistently has an internal reliability level of .95 and test-retest coefficients in excess of .80. The instrument is composed of four subscales, including group communication, meeting communication, interpersonal communication, and public speaking. Scores on the PRCA-24 range from 80 or higher which indicate high levels of communication apprehension, 51 or lower representing or indicating low levels of communication, and an average apprehension level represented by scores between 52 and 79.

Findings

A total of 226 surveys were returned for inclusion in the data analysis, representing an average of 45 surveys per institution. The majority of participants (73%) were enrolled in majors in four academic colleges: liberal arts (n=64; 28%), business (n=42; 18%), education (n=37; 16%), and science (n=24; 11%). The majority of study participants held either junior (n=99; 44%) or senior (n=90; 40%) academic standing, and over half (n=135; 59.7%) were elected

senators or representatives (with the remaining n=91 or 40.26% holding elected leadership offices, such as president, vice president, secretary, president of the senate, etc.).

As a group, the entire population had a mean score of 64.9 on the PRCA-24, indicating a normal level of communication apprehension. The composite of 64.9 included the following subscale scores: group 16, meeting 15.8, dyad 14.4, and public speaking 18.7. When data were segregated by student government leaders and members of the senate, one significant difference was identified. For student government leaders, the overall PRCA score was 65, with the following breakdown by subscale: group 15, meeting 16.6, dyad 15.4, and public speaking 18. For senators, an overall average PRCA score of 65.6 was identified, including group 15, meeting 15.8, dyad 14.4, and public speaking 20.4. Through a two-way analysis of variance and Tukey post-hoc test, a significant difference was identified between the public speaking score of senate leaders (18) and senators (20.4) ($p < .05$; $p = .0111$; $F = 6.00$).

Discussion

Study findings confirmed that those seeking elected positions to represent the voices of others in decision-making have normal levels of communication apprehension. Broadly, this means that these individual students are not afraid to speak out and speak up regarding on a consistent basis about the issues and concerns that they might have. This finding suggests that additional research into the variability of apprehension level as a determinant of participation student government should be explored. Additionally, findings suggest that leaders in these student government settings have even lower apprehension levels, particularly related to the subscale of public speaking. Also, senators had a lower dyadic apprehension level that might suggest that those serving in the larger body are better equipped to build smaller social networks to support larger initiatives.

The overall normal range of apprehension levels is also a note of caution for student government bodies, and student senates need to be aware of the culture and environment that it creates, and the extent that these environments and cultures encourage, or more importantly discourage, participation. This concept of environmental structuring to allow for greater or impaired participation is also an area that is in need of greater study.

Few student government bodies provide meaningful training and orientation for senators, or other leaders, about how to be a "good" representative of the interests of others. As student affairs professionals embrace their responsibilities to provide such training, they should be acutely aware of the need to hone and refine public speaking as an element of being a successful advocate for other students.

These research findings open additional doors for further inquiry related to the roles that student government leaders and representatives play, how interactions lead to influence, and how power is developed, shared, and employed in the environment of student decision-making. Questions such as these must be addressed through both conceptual and applied paradigms, and will ultimately help colleges and universities become better training grounds for civic engagement.

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