Research in Brief

Taking on Leadership Roles: Community College Student Government Leaders Transition to Formal Positions of Elected Authority

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Community colleges have traditionally served underrepresented populations of college students, including first-generation, minority, adult, and academically under-prepared students (Miller, Pope, & Steinmann, 2005). As gateway institutions, they have built an infrastructure to support students with certain needs. As these colleges change their enrollment patterns, as Wolgemuth, Kees, and Safarik (2003) asserted, they must, too, change their infrastructure. Specifically, services designed exclusively for non-traditional, at-risk, first-generation students may be woefully inadequate for a new generation of students who are most interested in a traditional academic environment, have strong academic credentials, and who are using the community college as a gateway to a traditional four-year college.

Facilitating student needs in a community college has traditionally taken on the functional title of "student services." Yet, as student characteristics, needs, and demands change, these services may be evolving to more contemporary versions of "student affairs." This means that community colleges are embracing activities such as athletics, honors programs, residential education, and other student organizations. One activity in particular that is important to these colleges is student government (Miles, 2010).

Student government is important to community colleges for a variety of reasons, well beyond simply providing students an opportunity to be involved in charting the direction of the college. Student governments provide opportunities for students to learn about the democratic process, how to represent the interests of others, the responsibility of civic participation, and even how to interact with senior institutional leaders on important topics (Bray, 2006).

The current study was designed to explore how community college students transition to their roles as elected student government representatives. If community colleges are indeed enrolling more traditional and academically focused students, the transition process should be relatively easy; if they continue to enroll and are attempting to engage at-risk or first-generation students, however, the transition could possibly be quite difficult.

Student Government as an Opportunity

Student governing bodies have been an historical part of higher education from the early beginnings of the academy. Since the inception of student governance, coordinating bodies of students have helped to protect the interests of students while advocating for policies and procedures that respect and enhance the student experience on campus. Student governance in its current form evolved in just the past 40 years, driven largely by the student activism of the 1960's and 1970's. Student activism led in at least part of the creation of student trustees and the delegation of responsibilities and rights to student groups (Davis, 2006).

Research into student governance has fallen into two distinct categories: operational issues and substantive issues (Miller & Nadler, 2006). Operational issues surround how governance bodies work, how to get students involved, how they participate, and what students get out of participating in representative bodies. Substantive issues include the realm of issues student governments face, encounter, and choose to undertake. Recent research in this area has shown student governments involved in fighting tuition increases, assuring student safety on campus, challenging transfer policies, and even questioning institutional funding of certain programs.

Although there has been a significant and consistent literature framework, little has been directed to students in two-year colleges (Miles, 2010). Most research on community college students has focused on the at-risk populations enrolling in these colleges, transfer issues, career and occupational education, and the provision of basic student services in the college. One exception was Miles (2010) recent qualitative description of community college student leaders that revealed a varied set of experiences and motivations related to serving as an elected leader, including strong institutional pride, the need to develop relationships on campus, and finding and using the support of institutional administrators to make student governance effective.

The current research project is exploratory in describing both who community college student governance body leaders are and how they transitioned into their role. Findings are important for a variety of reasons beyond establishing a unique knowledge base for community college student governance. These findings can be used tohelp these students explore the democratic process, represent others, manage conflict, and encourage discourse in an academic environment. Study findings are particularly important to community college leaders who must continue to try and serve the student populations.

Research Methods

Data were collected from seven community colleges in the mid-west and mid-south regions of the U. S. using a research-team developed pencil-and-paper survey instrument. Institutions were selected purposefully by finding administrator support and cooperation for collecting data by either attending a meeting of the community college's student senate or by inviting student senators to a meeting and to complete the survey. An average of nearly ten surveys were collected at each institution, with a range of 8 to 14 surveys returned from each institution. The instrument was adapted from research on community college faculty senates and the original work by one of the research-team member's doctoral dissertation. The instrument was pilot tested and validated with a panel of non-respondent students. The instrument was comprised of

three sections: background information on the respondent section that had seven questions, a section of 15 questions on how the student transitioned to the elected leadership position, and a 14 question section on strategies to increase participation in student government. The two sections on transition and increasing participation made use of 5-point Likert-type scale, where 5=strongly agree, progressing to 1=strongly disagree. Data were collected in the spring term of 2011.

Findings

A total of 67 students completed usable surveys, including 26 males (39%) and 40 females, and over half of the respondents were of a traditional age (58%; n=38). Over two-thirds of the respondents were Caucasian (68%; n=45). The respondents self-reported an earned grade point average of "B" (between a 3.0 and 3.49 on a 4-point scale). Respondents reported that they relied most upon mentoring from a student government advisor (mean 4.42, SD .6339).

Respondents: As shown in Table 1, nearly two-thirds of the respondents were female (61%), and nearly 90% of the respondents were under the age of 23. Students participating in the study were generally strong academically (83% selfreported at least a "B" grade point average), and more than half of the responding students were an officer in at least one other student organization (52%). The majority of respondents were Caucasian (68%), although there was significant minority representation, including 12% African American students and 11% multi-ethnic students.

Transition Strategies: Students were asked to rate their level of agreement regarding 15 transition techniques. Transition was intended to be the descriptor of how the student moved from being a member of the student body at the community college to being an elected student government leader. The ratings were on a five-point Likert-type scale, where 5=strongly agree with the transition strategy progressing to 1=strongly disagree. The overall mean rating for the 15 items was 3.78, indicating that as a catalog of strategies for transitioning to a student government leadership position, there were neutral perceptions leaning toward agreement that they were used. As shown in Table 2, respondents agreed most strongly with *learning to balance multiple roles* (mean 4.42; SD .6339), following by *taking time to learn how to become a leader* (mean 4.31; SD .7051), and *focusing on the personal benefits gained from serving on student government* (mean 4.25; SD .7298).

Also shown in Table 2, responding students agreed least with the transition strategies of *applying what was learned in classes to serving as a student government member* (mean 2.77; SD 1.25), *taking time to build relationships with fellow student government leaders* (mean 2.32, SD 1.231), and *receiving transition reports or documents from the outgoing student government members* (mean 3.37; SD 1.23).

The variables of gender and age distribution were explored as possible variables that might be reasons for different reliance on transition strategies. This possible differentiation was based on previous research. An ANOVA comparing mean ratings of transition strategies based on gender, age, or GPA indicated no significant differences (*f*=1.023; Sig. .316).

Discussion

Findings suggest that the profile of student government leaders in community colleges are indeed the traditional college students observed by Wolgemuth, Kees, and Sfarisk (2003). These students are primarily of a traditional age, non-minority, and non-first-generation student. This might mean that community colleges are indeed drawing a more traditional student body to their campus, or conversely, it might mean that the notion of a student government is attractive to traditional students, and that student government is a strong conduit to involve and engage students on campus.

If a community college population includes a large segment of students seeking a traditional college experience, programs and activities can be designed to be part of that experience. Many community colleges already have traditional student affairs programs in place, including clubs and organizations, athletics, career services, and campus media. Students may just need to know that the programs are available and that their participation is welcomed in order to become involved.

If students want to become part of the decision-making structure of colleges and universities, student government is an effective mechanism for that involvement. Advisors of student governments, including faculty, staff, and administrators will benefit from learning more about their current students, including what those students hope to gain from their college experience. Advisors can take steps to promote student government as a way to become involved on campus. Having a greater understanding of their student population will help them reach out to students and invite them to become part of student government.

References

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Table 1
Background Information of Participants

Characteristic	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	26	39%
Female	40	61
Age Range		
17-19	38	58
20-23	19	29
24-27	2	3
Other	7	4
Self Reported GPA		
3.5-4.0	34	51
3.0-4.9	21	32
2.5-2.99	7	11
Below 2.5	2	3
First Generation Student		
Yes	31	47
No	35	53
Officer in at least one other student organization		
Yes	34	52
No	31	47
Racial Self-Identification		
African American	8	12
Hispanic/Latino	3	4
White/Caucasian	45	68
Multi-ethnic	7	11
Other	3	4

Table 2
Transition to Leadership Strategies

Transition Strategy	Mean	SD
Student government advisor mentored me.	3.48	1.255
Student government advisor guided all elected students.	3.68	1.054
I took the time to learn how to be a good leader.	4.31	.7051
I learned to balance multiple roles.	4.42	.6339
I developed relationships with other more senior students.	4.09	1.105
I learned from my experiences in other student organizations.	4.12	1.045
I was clear in focusing on serving my fellow students.	4.09	1.091
I focused on the personal benefits I gained from serving on student government.	4.25	.7298
I learned from the difficult challenges I had to face.	3.60	1.107
The transition to student government was facilitated by others.	4.24	.8238
I received transition reports or documents from the outgoing student government members.	3.37	1.237
I applied what I learned in my classes to serving as a student government member.	2.77	1.250
I used the student government constitution as a resource.	3.60	1.093
I took time to build relationships with my fellow student government leaders.	3.25	1.231
I attended retreats with my fellow new student government members.	3.48	1.0443