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Student Government and the University Administrative Agenda Alignment

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ABSTRACT

Within institutions of higher education, shared governance is an essential component to a healthy functionality. Among the many stakeholders at these institutions, students are the largest in number and hold primacy. Participation in student governance establishes a sense of shared ownership over their communities while also providing a unique avenue for students to gain wisdom and develop critical skill sets. Senior administrators at these institutions have many inherent challenges due to an organization that is largely decentralized and autonomous. The purpose for conducting this study was to analyze Student Government Associations (SGA) at 8 select land-grant institutions of higher education in order to establish the extent of administrative agenda alignment after reviewing policy priorities for SGAs and their respective presidents. The study ultimately found minimal agenda alignment between student body presidents and university presidents. Student body presidents indicated that they did not necessarily anticipate alignment given the differences in their constituencies and most indicated positive relationships. These findings emphasize the importance of shared governance within these institutions. Positive relationships between SGAs and their presidents emphasize constructive communication and reciprocity between the subjects which leads to more buy-in by stakeholders and innovative ideas.

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Within institutions of higher education Student Governmental Associations (SGAs) take upon many forms and names from one institution to the next. However, these organizations are all rooted in the same tenants: they are based on the democratic representation and activism as they strive to respond to the needs of students and priorities of their fellow students (Miller & Nadler, 2006). Further, one of the key principles that defines these organizations is their institutional longevity (McKaig, 1999). In contrast to other campus entities, an SGA in and of itself establishes a prevailing institutional identity and history (1999) while simultaneously addressing potentially systemic and multifaceted issues. This inherent ability for an SGA to establish a shared history among students over many decades establishes a clear relevancy that Keller (1985) believed is so often missing from public policy and higher education scholarship.

The model of higher education in the United States for centuries was one that emphasized a top-down approach with faculty at the top and students at the bottom. We now know, however, that more is needed beyond typical classroom instruction. Participation in co-curricular activities is deeply impactful on the learning and the maturation process of undergraduate students regardless of the specifics of those activities (Astin & Astin, 2000; Bray, 2006; LaForge, 2020). Being a part of an SGA is an especially potent way to develop leadership qualities in students regardless of the specifics of the issues that are being undertaken (Goodman, 2021; Laosebikan-Buggs,

2006; Miles, 2010; Miles, 2011). Astin and Astin (2000) wrote that fostering “collaboration, authenticity, shared purpose, [and] commitment” will cultivate leadership in ways that in-classroom learning does not necessarily provide (p. 29). Moreover, research has shown that students involved with shared governance on their campuses enhance a student’s marketability in the workforce, interpersonal skills, and enhanced morality (LeBoeuf, 2020) because dissent and activism spur conflict and ultimately conflict resolution which is a key indicator of a student’s development (Biddix, 2014).

In addition to the importance of student development and continuity of traditions, SGAs exist to participate in the governance of the institution. The success of the relationship between elected student leadership and an institution’s executives is essential for overall institutional wellness. This is hardly a simple endeavor, however. The complexity of the role played by the institution’s most senior executive is arguably one of the largest obstacles to successful shared governance. Duderstadt (2007) described the overarching trials university presidents must constantly balance:

[...] the university presidency requires an extremely delicate and subtle form of leadership, sometimes based more on style than substance and usually more inclined to build consensus rather than take decisive action. The very phrases used to characterize academic leadership, such as “herding cats” or “moving cemeteries,” suggest the complexity of the university presidency. Universities are led, not managed (2007, p. 106).

The leadership of a president requires that they provide intentional collaboration with student leaders so that they understand the issues that arise among the student body and that are addressed through an SGA. Miles (2018) was categorical in making this point: “Presidents need to engage their campuses and focus on students as individuals [...] [and] distinguish the fine line between students as customers and students as young adults” (p. 10).

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

The purpose for conducting this research study was to analyze SGAs, their priorities, agendas, actions, and experiences with campus leadership. This study provides insight into the extent to which power and authority are shared between administrators and elected student leaders. In analyzing SGAs at 8 select land-grant institutions of higher education, the answers to the following 4 research questions were sought: (1) How do student leaders at select land-grant institutions of higher education describe their policy priorities? (2) How do the presidents at the same institutions describe their priorities in select institutional or media documents? (3) To what extent are the agendas of SGAs and institutional presidents aligned? (4) How did student body presidents describe their working relationship with their respective institutional leader and does that impact agenda alignment? Answers to these questions were found utilizing a qualitative methodology.

This study provides much needed insight into the complex organizational operations found at flagship institutions of higher education. The convolution of these large institutions is akin to a large, multi-national corporation. In addition to managing the priorities established by state and federal government, universities are in and of themselves emblematic of larger scholarship of public policy due to their various layers of authority, competing stakeholders, and power

struggles. Student stakeholders exist in a unique, albeit temporary, world that provides them with tools and opportunities that are vital to achieve academic success and overall cognitive development as a young adult. Utilizing democratically-elected student government as the focal point of this research mirrored the democratic process demonstrated at many other realms in a democratic society making the study of SGAs applicable to the field.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Student Government

The history of SGAs as advocates and policy makers on campuses originated during the 16th century with students advocating for their interests (May, 2010). At that time, college campuses were small by today's standards and largely existed for the benefit of wealthy white men. Students attending these institutions were not afforded rights or autonomy and curricula were typically confined to teachings of Greek, Roman, and Biblical texts (2010). To counter the lack of intellectual autonomy, literary societies were born at Harvard University or Yale University (though, some dispute which one was truly the pioneering institution). Writing on the birth of student spirit at Yale, Kelley (1974) described the literary societies:

There they could debate, orate, and discuss to their hearts' content. And from the small society libraries they could borrow books of a lighter character than those owned by the college. Frederick Rudolph correctly says that these societies, which originated at Yale but soon appeared elsewhere, were "the first effective agency of intellect to make itself felt in the American college" (p. 107).

While literary societies evolved in the subsequent few centuries, until the 1960s, students within institutions of higher education were governed by the legal concept of *in loco parentis*, which is literally translated to "in place of" (Oxford English Dictionary, 2016). The term is "rooted in the British and American common law traditions" (Lee, 2011, p. 67) and established that academic institutions could subsume the role of parent and guardian for their students. This limited the ability of students to participate in anything that truly resembled shared governance. For example, these early forms of governance for women students did not participate in feminist activism, and instead found themselves on the other side of this ideological spectrum by enforcing standards for women's attire, curfews, and campus rules (e.g., gender role conformity) (Sartorius, 2018).

This concept was ultimately deemed unconstitutional when hundreds of Black students from Alabama State College in March 1960 marched on the state capital. Embarrassed by the protests, the Governor of Alabama used the power of his office and requested that the State Board of Education expel nine of the Black student protestors for being disruptive by taking part in the protest. The Board complied with the governor's request. No hearing was provided prior to the Alabama State College president carrying out the Board of Education's directive. The case was ultimately litigated, and the Fifth Circuit Court believed that the actions undertaken by the Board of Education clearly violated the constitutional rights of the students in question:

We are confident that precedent as well as a most fundamental constitutional principle support our holding that due process requires notice and some opportunity for hearing before a student at a tax-supported college is expelled for misconduct... (*Dixon v. Alabama*, 1961, p. 158)

The standard established in *Dixon v. Alabama* remains the standard utilized by institutions of higher education after more than six decades.

Shared Governance and the University President

The university president has a unique role as the chief executive responsible for tens of thousands of students, thousands of staff and faculty, billions of dollars in endowments, hundreds of millions of dollars in research expenditures, among many other areas that require oversight (Birnbaum, 2005). A retired 4-star Navy admiral, William McRaven, remarked after retiring as the University of Texas system president, “The toughest job in the nation is the one of an academic- or health-institution president” (Thomason, 2018, p. para 1). Giving credence to this sentiment, university executives must contend with an organization that is largely decentralized and autonomous. Faculty largely decide what to teach and by what means they do so. This autonomy is extended to students as they can engage academically to varying degrees of vigor and/or through extracurricular activities. Donors and lawmakers will use the power of the purse to persuade or dissuade institutional decisions based on their personal interests and values. As such, the presidency can be extremely isolating and can operate in “a bubble” (McNaughtan et al., 2019). This leaves the university president in a situation that will ultimately lead to a failure to please many, if not most, stakeholders when a given decision is made. This can leave them generally weak in terms of having the ability to aggressively address issues. Despite this, however, “the [university president] is the single most influential person” within institutions of higher education (Birnbaum, 1988, p. 168). Or as Duderstadt (2007) described, “The very phrases used to characterize academic leadership, such as ‘herding cats’ or ‘moving cemeteries,’ suggest the complexity of the university presidency” (p. 106). Effectively communicating a vision can be the most important variable in achieving those goals and ensuring that said influence is used productively.

Moreover, the frequent attention and political capital given to crisis communication (i.e., “putting out fires”) is significant for presidents, and as such, it is important to have committees of experienced individuals to help craft long-term, non-urgent agendas for the future (McNaughtan & Pal, 2019; McNaughtan et al., 2019). These committees can use their unique expertise and experience to help foresee issues ahead of time to potentially reduce the crisis-nature of presidential communications and provide opportunity to be proactive rather than merely reactive. Shared governance is therefore pivotal to ensure more proactive decision making. Shared governance can appear in the area of Student Trustees (see (Lozano, 2016); Lozano and Hughes, 2017), between administrators, and Boards (see Lozano, 2020), and within SGAs and student governance (Goodman, 2021; Miller & Nadler, 2006; Smith et al., 2016). Trachtenberg et al. (2013) discussed several case studies related to failed public university presidents. They concluded that a presidency can be easily derailed when presidents “behave in infantile and insensitive ways with a range of their constituents” (2013, p. 59). The ability to lead is based in the notion that a clear vision be established through relationship building with

students and other stakeholders. A failure to establish sufficient social capital on a campus can lead to failure for even the most seasoned academic leaders, a social capital built upon trust (Trachtenberg et al., 2013). Tolliver and Murry (2017) expounded on this:

Perceptions of trust among higher education leaders, particularly influenced by personality, culture, motivation, values, reliability, competence, and intuition, has been found as a key variable that determines successful relationships, as shown in a trust-centered, integrated approach model (2017, p. 12).

Leaders who establish a vision collaboratively utilizing current structures of shared governance will be more likely to realize their goals and establish overall institutional success by tapping into their constituents' aspiration and anxieties (Aldighrir, 2013). Astin and Astin (2000) further noted that skepticism and distrust among a campus community are the primary factor in a leader's ultimate failure.

Framework

Agenda setting and subsequent policy implementation within the realm of academia is uniquely complex. Arthur (2011) wrote, "...in contemporary society, colleges and universities remain a distinct type of organization" that operate in a way that can be described as organized chaos (p. 3). The diversity of priorities that must be considered by campus administrators on a day-to-day is stark. Cohen et al. (1972) coined the term "Garbage Can Model" (GCM) to apply specifically to the academe due to its complex and often-competing goals. More specifically, they use 3 qualifiers to identify organized anarchy (numbers added):

[1] It can be described better as a loose collection of ideas than as a coherent structure; it discovers preferences through action more than it acts on the basis of preference... [2] It operates on the basis of simple trial-and-error procedures, the residue of learning from the accidents of past experience participants... [3] Vary in the amount of time and effort they devote to different domains; involvement varies from one time to another (Cohen et al., 1972, p. 1).

Put differently, institutions of higher education find themselves establishing policy reactively, advocating for solutions while in search of problems, and the process by which those policies are managed is contingent on whom among the stakeholders is leading the charge and how much effort they are able to lend to the issue compared with other stakeholders; these represent the 3 streams that flow into the perpetually disorganized "garbage can" (1972). The ability for certain problems and solutions to be realized further comes down to an issue of energy quota by participants that can be contingent via both access and influence (Levinthal, 2012). Denrell (2012) elaborated on this notion and posited, "The nature of the choice will change depending on who happens to take part in the decision, what aspects of the alternatives become salient, and how the discussion of the alternatives proceeds" (p. 66). Further, this fluctuates with time given energy outputs, problems, and solutions shift and change.

In recent years, policy implementation theory has evolved to embrace more democratic models for policy making. deLeon and deLeon (2002) discussed the matter when they wrote, "We

suggest more democracy is better than less; that is, more direct forms should be preferred unless there are strong and articulated reasons to avoid” (p. 482). This democratic emphasis has further evolved in the subsequent decades to include a more specific definition of collaborative policymaking (Ansell et al., 2017; Sørensen & Torfing, 2011). This notion combines the conceptions of top-down and bottom-up implementation frameworks, in addition to elements of agenda setting. The literature proposes the following conditions for using collaborative policymaking as a vehicle for improved policy implementation: 1) better ideas are generated and selected among individuals with contrasting experiences; 2) collaboration between policy makers and street-level bureaucrats creates a mutual sense of ownership; and 3) the collaborative process establishes relationships that will help cultivate additional innovation (Sørensen & Torfing, 2011).

The reason for developing the policy implementation through collaborative policymaking is found with the inadequacies established in the first 3 generations of implementation theory. Scholars failed to intellectually articulate a theory on implementation that was applicable in-practice beyond one specific study (deLeon & deLeon, 2002). For example, top-down implementation carries inherent risk that disengagement from “street-level bureaucrats” (i.e., those who deal with implementation on a day-to-day basis) by policymakers is too large of a chain to be realistically productive (Lipsky, 1980). The top-down theories must rectify the fact that “discretionary practices of street-level bureaucrats will distort the production and delivery of services and prevent the realization of the overall policy objectives” (Ansell et al., 2017, p. 470) if they are not provided the proverbial seat at the table. Finally, policymakers are likely to encounter basic systemic resistance due to the fact that many issues are ingrained within long entrenched socioeconomic challenges (2017). As such, the value of collaborative policymaking is its on-going nature; the long-term cooperation from stakeholders theoretically establishes sufficient resources and buy-in to manage anticipated and unforeseen implementation challenges. This notion is crucial given the immensely bureaucratic and diverse nature of higher education and its stakeholders.

METHODS

SGAs at eight land-grant, flagship institutions of higher education were selected for this study. Two institutions were chosen per region as defined by the U.S. Census Bureau (2018): West, Midwest, South, and Northeast. Utilizing Google and institutional websites, a sample of convenience was established. When determining which institutions to utilize in the study, many SGAs did not have accessible or up-to-date official documents available for analysis. Furthermore, an institution with a permanent chancellor/president was sought for purposes of continuity in governance and to ensure that the stated policy priorities would be unlikely to shift suddenly.

Land-grant institutions allowed for the researcher to collectively review a group of institutions founded with similar missions and commitments to enhancing public higher education (Anonymous, 2012). Flagship institutions were utilized due to key variables that are common among them. According to Douglass (2016), they share characteristics including having a heavy focus on research and being “focused on regional and national relevancy” (p. 5).

Official meeting minutes for SGAs from the Fall 2021 semester were reviewed and coded via thematic analysis as defined by Braun and Clarke (2012). Coding was done via NVIVO software. Matters were coded if they were discussed by an officer's report or if a specific action or legislation was introduced and debated. At the onset of the document analysis, deductive reasoning was utilized to establish a codebook. For example, given the status of the COVID-19 pandemic during fall 2021, discussions related to immunization and mask mandates were assumed to be likely topics of SGA business. Additionally, I utilized past and current academic and professional experiences to deduce additional codes. During the process of coding the 8 institutions, inductive logic was employed to code and establish themes among the SGAs. The number of meeting minutes varied from 6 to 14 per institution, with half of them containing 11 (corresponding with the number of weeks in the semester minus scheduled time off). For the SGAs that met less frequently, their documents tended to be longer and denser with agenda items. With the exception of one institution, the amount of data coded was consistent throughout averaging approximately 150 coded references per institution.

Utilizing the institutional websites for each SGA, the student body president was contacted at each university. While 8 replied to the recruitment correspondence 2 out of the 8 ceased communication and were not ultimately interviewed. The 2 institutions in the Northeast region were not interviewed. Each interview was conducted and recorded via Zoom. All 6 presidents interviewed were male-presenting and their semester at the time of the interview was second semester of their senior year apart from 1 Western student body president who was a second semester junior. On average, the interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes. The audio files from the recording were transcribed using NVIVO's transcription software. Each participant was provided a copy of the transcript to review and correct any transcription errors.

In determining the policy priorities for institutional presidents, a variety of documents were utilized. All the data gathered was from the fall 2021 semester. When possible, data was gathered from a "state of the university" address due to the fact that the general purpose of such an address is to update the community on the progress of policy priorities and to establish future priorities. Among the 8 institutions, 4 had such addresses available for review and analysis: 2 from the Midwest, 1 from the South, and 1 from the West. The address from the president at the institution in the South was in the form of an audio file that was transcribed using NVIVO transcription software and coded. One institution in the Midwest provided a verbatim transcript on their website, the other Midwestern university provided a copy of a PowerPoint presentation, and the institution in the West provided a textual summary of the address.

In the event that such an address was not available, a record of direct communication to the campus community during the Fall 2021 semester was sought. For 2 of the institutions, 1 from the South and 1 from the Northeast, a collection of university-wide communications was collected from their institutional websites and coded. One Southern institution had 11 such statements and 1 Northeastern institution provided 5 direct messages to the campus community. The remaining 2 institutions did not have easily accessible documents that would allow for policy priorities to be clearly established and coded. As such, using the search feature on the website of a campus-run periodical, the names of the respective presidents' names were searched for the specified semester. For one of the institutions in the West, the periodical provided a detailed interview with the president in which questions specifically related to policy priorities

were explored. The institution in the Northeast did not provide substantive information via the campus-run periodical. As such, Google News was used to search for this administrator and an interview from the fall 2021 semester was found from a major regional newspaper. These interviews were subsequently coded to establish themes related to policy priorities.

RESULTS

Question 1: How did elected student government leaders at select land grant universities describe their organizational agendas and priorities?

A variety of policy priorities emerged in both the semi-structured interviews as well as the document analysis of SGA meeting minutes. Although, never mentioned during interviews as a specific policy priority, the documental analysis established clearly that internal organizational management consumed a significant amount of time. More specifically, with approximately 1,350 individual references coded, approximately 530 were related to management of the organization itself. These references included matters of nominations, committee structure, leadership responsibilities, and the sanctioning of sitting officers (Smith et al., 2016).

Campus infrastructure was the next most prominent discussion. These particular policy priorities were reflected by some of the interview subjects, but a majority of the coded references were found within meeting minutes. More specifically, they included extensive capital projects, parking and transit issues, and providing updated technology for a select group of classrooms or campus buildings. The student body president from an institution in the West noted the challenges that his institution was facing related to university housing and a rising real estate market:

The biggest [policy issue] for us is housing for students. So, [city name] is the town that our university is in, and in the last few years had an incredible increase in housing prices. I think like 60 percent [increase] in six months or just something wild. And so that's been a real challenge for students is to find housing off campus...a lot of students live off campus as well. And that's been a real difficulty is to compete in with the [city name] housing market.

Issues related to making campuses more environmentally sustainable were also brought up in 3 of the 6 interviews. For example, one institution in the West worked with their facilities management team to replace gas-powered leaf blowers with battery operated leaf blowers. Alongside policy related to environmentally conscious infrastructure, multiple institutions further discussed the notion of divestment from corporations in the fossil fuel industry.

Thereafter, it was established that matters related to campus wellness were the next most prominent point of discussions within the documents and as stated by student body presidents to me during interviews. Wellness issues ranged from student mental health, COVID-19 protocol, sexual assault, and public safety on or around a campus. Mental health was brought up by a majority of the interview subjects. Student mental health was viewed as the number one issue facing their campus for both institutions in the Midwest and one in the West. Specifically, they sought to combat rising rates of suicide among students. Mental health was specifically noted

nearly 50 times throughout official meeting minutes. Similarly, physical wellness and safety in general was mentioned 75 times throughout the documents and referenced 4 times among interview subjects. Notes taken during the interviews by me also demonstrate the emphasis on wellness and other safety issues.

Each SGA was found to be institutionally tasked with some manner of distribution of student activity fee moneys. This took the form of student-focused programming and events. While only one student body president mentioned this as a specific priority during interviews, it was among the most prominent coded agenda items within official SGA documents with nearly 150 references across each institution. The meeting minutes noted a variety of programming including mental health awareness, diversity and inclusion-related events, and holiday celebrations. A student body president in the West described student programming post-COVID-19 shutdowns as a key element of his tenure in office.

Campus issues related to matters of diversity were commonly described by student body presidents as key policy priorities and this was also somewhat reflected within the analyzed documents. Policy related to diversity, equity, and inclusion was referenced nearly 100 times throughout meeting minutes and by 4 of the 6 student body presidents during interviews. These descriptions included multiple references to the notion of “belonging” and ensuring that those tasked with diversity-related matters at the administrative level on a campus were adequately fulfilling their duties as diversity officers.

Unlike the conflict-ridden 1960s, SGAs demonstrated an aversion to direct advocacy for issues not specifically related to their campus community. The student body presidents were asked directly about this and frequently noted a strong desire to avoid alienating students on campus who may disagree with a position, or the particular policy being advocated by their elected student government. That said, most of the student body presidents noted organizational support for combating racism and supporting broader movements such as Black Lives Matter. One president described these issues as being “human rights” issues and he was therefore willing to risk alienating students regarding these topics. Another noted that he “didn’t care” if racists were upset with him for advocating for certain social justice issues.

Question 2: At the same institutions, what agendas and priorities were identified by institutional leadership documents?

When analyzing the priorities of the presidents of the same public land-grant institutions, a number of observations can be made. To start, out of approximately 350 coded references found among documents outlining policy priorities, the prominent topic was related to institutional research and innovation with approximately 75 individual references. It was notable that several presidents spent a considerable amount of time discussing a specific area of research in which their institution excels above others. For example, a president from a Southern institution discussed being a leader in cybersecurity research. A president from a Midwestern university sought to prioritize the unique diagnostic imaging capabilities housed on their campus. A unique bioscience incubator was noted by a president from a Western institution. These discussions establish the means by which institutional leadership seeks to distinguish themselves among their

peers. Only one institution from the Northeast failed to articulate a specific research vision within the documents reviewed and coded.

In addition to prioritizing institutional distinctiveness in research, ensuring faculty are being awarded external research funding from federal agencies was prominent. Apart from one institution in the Northeast, each university took time to demonstrate the value placed in these particular rewards. However, it was notable that none of the institutions provided specific praise to graduate students for their research contributions. Of the 15 coded references related to graduate students or graduate programs, only one institution referenced specific initiatives aimed at benefiting graduate students. From an institution in the South, said priorities centered on an increase in funding as well as new programs to focus on professional development seminars. Only 3 other universities specifically referenced graduate students at all and did so with very generalized policy priorities. For example, a president from a Midwestern institution noted that it was important to work towards “placement of graduate students and postdocs in key academic, industry, government positions.” No further details were provided. Considering the role of graduate students in conducting research, the omission was prominent.

Campus improvements and capital projects were prominent in the analyzed documents. Discussions related to new buildings, renovations, and technological improvements were referenced approximately 40 times. When discussing campus infrastructure, institutional leaders described a variety of specific goals. For example, one institution in the Northeast lauded its work on have an environmentally substantiable campus per rankings established by the environmental advocacy organization The Sierra Club. A president from a Southern university prioritized renovations to multiple academic buildings and renaming said buildings after former African American students. In further contrast, the president from a Western institution noted the importance of an upcoming construction project for a new student wellness center.

Outside of research, fundraising, and campus infrastructure improvements, some areas were noted for their lack of prominence. For example, only one institution referenced campus sexual assault, an issue that has garnered considerable media attention in recent years (Patel & Roesch, 2018). This particular president released 3 specific statements to the campus community on the subject. Otherwise, the topic went unmentioned by the other 7 institutions reviewed. Additionally, mental health and well-being were only referenced a total of 5 times, but each reference came from a different president. Similarly, issues related to diversity, equity, and inclusion were referenced by 6 of 8 institutions. However, the total references only amounted to approximately 15.

Question 3: To what extent were the student government and institutional leadership agendas and priorities aligned?

When comparing the alignment of agenda priorities between SGAs and their respective institutional presidents, one key alignment can be determined. Policy implementation as it relates to improving campus infrastructure was an issue that was addressed by each university’s SGA’s official minutes. Multiple student body presidents also specifically labeled these issues as an issue that was prioritized during the interviews. For example, the student body president for an institution in the South noted the need for a new library and this discussion was also shown to be a significant priority throughout the coded minutes. He stated, “The library is one building where

the views that the students keep saying how much they have a disgust for.” He went on to note that he believed his institution’s president shared that same priority. However, this was not shown to be a priority based upon the documents reviewed. Another example can be found in the infrastructure priorities for the institution’s president and student body president from a university in the West. Both leaders acknowledged the significant importance for additional on-campus housing to be provided for students.

The notion of the improvement of campus buildings and technology was certainly an issue that generally aligned between these key institutional stakeholders, the specific goals for improvements tended to differ somewhat. For example, students mentioned parking and transit issues in the analyzed documents 60 times. Only one reference to parking and transit was found in the institutional leadership documents. Furthermore, presidents devoted much time to describing research accomplishments and priorities and the means by which new technologies and building space has helped implement those policies. Interviews and document analysis showed that scholarly research was not an issue SGAs prioritized.

The emphasis on campus sexual assault was an extremely high priority for students. Three student body presidents noted that sexual assault prevention and adjudication were among their top priorities. Only one university president addressed the issue. However, it was addressed prominently by this president in a media interview and within 3 direct campus-wide communications. The student body president at the same university also described sexual assault as the campus’ primary issue. Similarly, campus safety in general was discussed in 4 out of 6 interviews as being a major focal point for the SGA. Issues of general campus safety were further noted in the documents of each SGA more than 70 individual times. Institutional presidents, however, only referenced the issue a total of 10 times further establishing a contrast in policy priorities.

What is most noteworthy regarding the alignment—or lack thereof—between institutional presidents and student body presidents is that many of the students noted in their interviews that they did not anticipate any such alignment. For example, the student body president from an institution in the West noted the same but clarified that diverging policy priorities don’t interfere with shared governance:

I think in general, we have similar sort of overall goals, but there's some things that I think are an acute pain to students that are not that grand of an issue for her... so there's sort of a little bit of different framing there. But like one thing that's really awesome about our president is she's like, she doesn't make calls without, you know, like make decisions without first, really at least like understanding the viewpoints of stakeholders.

Along the same lines, several interview subjects specifically noted the fact that their institution’s presidents have external pressure from state legislators and members of the board of trustees. They acknowledged that this could impact a leader’s priorities but does not necessarily alter their overarching values when it comes to determining agenda priorities. Four out of the 6 student body presidents specifically noted the challenges faced due to external stakeholders such as state legislatures and boards of trustees.

Question 4: How did student body presidents describe their working relationship with their respective institutional leader and does that impact agenda alignment?

Among the 6 student body presidents interviewed, all except 1 SGA indicated that they felt supported by their president. The institution from the Midwest that categorized the relationship as negative stated the following:

And so, at the beginning of this year, I just kind of talked with my executive cabinet and my Senate and was like, “Do we want to try and keep building this relationship, or do we just want not to care as much about it and do things that help students that we can do without them?” And that's kind of the path we took because every time we were trying to do something good for students, it seemed like they didn't want to help, didn't want to encourage, it or were straight up blocking it.

It was further noted at the aforementioned institution that regular meetings and communication between the SGA and the institutional president were rare and often described as superficial in nature. Instead, the student body president communicated only when necessary and typically through intermediaries within the Division of Student Affairs. On the contrary, the other 5 student body presidents felt that their relationship was positive. For example, the student body president at the other institution in the Midwest described his relationship with his president as being like a “colleague and a friend.” One institution in the South described having a mutual respect and trust with his university president. These positive descriptions corresponded with the amount of communication between university presidents and student body presidents. With only one exception, student body presidents had an open line of communication with their campus leaders typically through mobile texting, phone calls, and email. Subjects indicated that solicitation of advice was two-way. That is, both student body presidents and their university president sought out the other for unsolicited advice. For one institution in the South, regular monthly meetings—which was the norm across the 4 other universities—were cancelled due to the fact that they spoke informally on such a frequent basis.

Although there are many agenda priorities that do not align between SGAs and university presidents, 4 of the 6 interview subjects specifically stated that they felt as if they were able to influence their president’s policy priorities. Document analysis demonstrated this alignment at a majority of the institutions studied. This was seen regarding off-campus housing for a university in the West, mental health issues for a Southern institution, and sexual assault for the other institution in the South. However, even when alignment was identified, the level of prioritization did not typically align based upon the prominence of coded references from documents and based upon notes taken during the interviews.

DISCUSSION

The relationship between the stakeholders analyzed for this study were shown to combine top-down and bottom-up policy frameworks and strongly emphasizes the importance of utilizing democracy in establishing collaborative policy implementation (deLeon & deLeon, 2002; Sørensen & Torfing, 2011). As such, this study demonstrates the benefits of collaborative policy implementation. First, when these relationships were positively exhibited, institutional leaders

and SGAs relied on the unique experiences and perspectives each brought to the table. Student body presidents noted using university presidents as a means to seek advice on possible policy priorities and concerns and university presidents utilized SGAs to provide insight into the student experience. Such a positive relationship can maximize the overall experiences of both leaders, and benefit the community at large (Goodman, 2021; Hardaway et al., 2021).

Next, campus infrastructure was a major area of agenda alignment, and this demonstrated a sense of mutual ownership of the campus between university presidents and SGAs. These relationships ultimately cultivate more innovative ideas. Consequently, for the one SGA that described a very negative relationship with their university's president, the opposite was observed. In this situation, students knowingly set their agendas understanding it was likely to instill conflict or face resistance with their campus' leadership. Simultaneously, the institution's president was unable to hear directly from student leaders and was subject to accusations of being out-of-touch and unconcerned with student needs. Furthermore, it was concluded that agenda alignment was limited. Nevertheless, all other participants spoke enthusiastically about their respective president's policy priorities even if they lacked alignment with their own. Participants further acknowledged that their respective agendas were inherently contrasting but described this as being positive for the institution as a whole. While this was surprising, it emphasizes the need for cooperation and the democratic process for agenda setting and collaborative policy implementation to be successfully realized. The one noticeable exception to this observation was regarding to issues related to campus safety and wellness. Students were found to be very attentive to crime on campus, sexual assault, and mental health. With little exceptions, however, university presidents failed to directly address these issues. The reason for this may be the intended audiences for the documents that were reviewed. SGAs are incentivized to ensure their constituents' concerns are being addressed due to the democratic nature of their organizations. The documents used to establish policy priorities for the institutions' presidents were directed at audiences that value institutional reputation. It is possible that despite the salience of these policy priorities on the select campuses, it did not serve those leaders to highlight them publicly.

Institutions of higher education occupy in a unique space in society. Land-grant institutions more specifically continue to play a vital role in providing post-secondary education to those who seek it and are hubs for life-altering research and innovation. For most undergraduate students, however, attending university functions to provide more than in-classroom education. Developing skills and cognitive abilities require experiential learning. Developmental psychology has established that rational moral functioning represents the final stages of development and this occurs during traditionally undergraduate years (Boyle, 2013). Davis (2013) punctuated this notion when she charged student affairs administrators to a create campus "where critical dialogue, self-reflection, and personal responsibility take place. Action must be taken to build a culture of civility and caring" (p. 50). Participants represented merely one individual within an SGA. However, they all spoke enthusiastically and with passion about their experiences in the role. Their relationships with university presidents were described as invaluable to their experience as undergraduate students. Respect for students and their place in society made their institutions and surrounding communities stronger.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

Presidents at institutions of higher education will benefit in several ways by cultivating relationships with democratically elected student leaders. Among the students interviewed, those who described their relationship as mostly positive with their respective presidents also noted that they would go out of their way to provide a productive flow of information to ensure their president “didn’t look poorly” to students. The relationships were found to be reciprocal and beneficial to both subjects when intentionally cultivated. Furthermore, regularly scheduled meetings between a university president and student body president were common among the institutions studied. However, those who indicated having the strongest relationships noted that they were able to build that relationship outside of one-on-one meetings. Instead, when institutional presidents included SGA leaders in high-level meetings and social events, a stronger sense of mutual trust seemed to be established. It would be recommended for university presidents to provide SGA leaders with as many of these opportunities as possible.

Future scholars would benefit from conducting semi-structured interviews with the university presidents from the institutions studied. The information provided with a semi-structured interview provides unique perspective that document analysis typically cannot convey. This data could be utilized to provide a roadmap for student body presidents as they embark on their time as a leader. The study could also be further expanded to include additional land-grant institutions. With dozens of such institutions in the United States, there is considerable opportunity to expand upon the research questions and utilize additional variables to establish superfluous observations related to, for example, comparison of urban and rural institutions.

CONCLUSION

The role that students play as key stakeholders on their campuses is of utmost importance for shared governance to be realized. While their scope and experience can lead to institutional leaders lazily rejecting their contributions, it has been demonstrated that their contribution should be valued and cultivated. As the Association of University Professors (1966) wrote, “If institutional support is to have its fullest possible meaning, it should incorporate the strength, freshness of view, and idealism of the student body” (p. 8). A failure to recognize this notion is done at the peril of an institution and, ultimately, the entire community.

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