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An Evaluation of Student Government: Diminishing the Disconnect between Student Government Organizations and their Constituencies

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An Evaluation of Student Government: Diminishing the Disconnect between Student Government Organizations and their Constituencies

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Abstract

Student Government Organizations (SGOs) exist to serve and represent the student body. However, SGOs often face issues that lead to a disconnect between them and their constituency. The issues that can lead to a disconnect include responsibilities and purpose, representation and voter turnout, lack of knowledge and transparency, relationship to administration, and internal issues such as bias and mistreatment, transition, and personal outcomes. This thesis proposes an intervention of a yearly Student Government Evaluation where student government organizations are evaluated by the student body and their members and then create an action plan based on the results. The aim of the proposed intervention is to help figure out the specific issues that are causing the disconnect between SGOs and their constituency, with the Evaluation being the crucial missing link to solve this ongoing problem.

Keywords: student government, student governance, evaluation, student affairs, higher education

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In this chapter, I introduce my thematic concern. I also explain how I came to this topic as well as share how my personal identities relate and inform my thematic concern. Finally, I outline each chapter of this thesis.

Introduction to My Thematic Concern

Student government organizations (SGOs) exist at many, if not most, higher education institutions. However, if you ask a group of typical college students, most could probably not describe what SGOs do. I believe that there is a disconnect between SGOs and their constituency, the student body. I noticed this discrepancy during my time as an undergraduate and a graduate student at two different universities. Through personal conversations with others about their experience at their higher education institutions as well as reviewing literature on student government, there seems to be issues for many SGOs at higher education institutions that may be causing this disconnect. Some issues are campus specific but many of them are the same across the board or similar across many institutions. Some of these issues include: representation of the student body, low voter turnout, lack of knowledge about the SGO, lack of transparency from the SGO, and other internal issues happening within the organization.

Why does this matter? SGOs exist at most higher education institutions in the United States. Thus, this issue has the potential to impact thousands of campuses across the nation. SGOs are an important part of those campuses. SGOs handle many issues and are decision makers on many topics that affect the student body. Those topics include (but are not limited to): funding and recognition of student organizations (Goodman, 2021b; Laosebikan-Buggs, 2006; Miles, 2011), student fee allocation (Goodman, 2021b; Goodman et al., 2021; Laosebikan-Buggs, 2006), raising of tuition (Goodman 2021b; Laosebikan-Buggs, 2006; Miles et al., 2011),

student safety (Goodman, 2021b; Miles et al., 2011), and residence life and housing policies (Goodman, 2021b; Goodman et al., 2021; Miles, 2011). SGOs exist to represent the student body and be their voice on campus and when making decisions (Laosebikan-Buggs, 2006; Smith et al., 2016). If SGOs are failing to do their intended duties and in a way that is representative of the student body, then they are failing the student body.

Students who feel that their SGO is not working for them and their peers, not working on issues that they care about, or disconnected from them may feel like they do not matter at their higher education institution. An SGO that is more connected to the student body could increase the sense of belonging of students on campus. Hagerty et al. (1992) defines sense of belonging as "the experience of personal involvement in a system or environment so that persons feel themselves to be an integral part of that system or environment" (p. 173). Sense of belonging at a higher education institution is promoted during "interactions with the social, academic, and professional services spheres of a student's experience" (Parkes, 2014, p. 5). Komives (2019) also explains that "engaged students often possess a stronger sense of belonging to their campus" (p. 16). If students have more opportunities to interact and engage with their SGO and feel that they have a good relationship with them, that they are listening to them, and sharing their values, that can create a sense of belonging in those students. Yet it is not just the interaction and communication with SGOs that will lead to this sense of belonging, it is the other parts (that they are being heard, their values are shared, they are represented, etc.) that foster it. According to Tinto (2015), "it is not engagement per se that drives sense of belonging, as it is students' perceptions of their belonging that derives from their engagement" (p. 8).

Having a student body that is more connected to their SGO would also be beneficial to student affairs and other higher education professionals at a higher education institution because

they would be able to have a better insight to what their students currently care about and are having issues with. The SGO would be able to share this kind of information that students might not be willing to share directly with professional staff at their institution. When the student government then brings those issues to the professionals at their institution, the professionals can work toward creating solutions, programs, services, etc. that would address the issues that the students care about. This would, in turn, also create a better sense of belonging and connectedness to their campus and institution because they would feel like their institution is taking their concerns seriously and working for them.

Sense of belonging is important to higher education institutions. Institutions that want to ensure retention and persistence in their students should be concerned about student's sense of belonging. According to Parkes (2014) sense of belonging promotes student retention. Tinto (1987) explains that when a student has a sense of belonging, they often feel a bond or commitment that binds the student to a group or community even when struggles or challenges arise in that group or community. Having an SGO that is more connected to the student body and where the student body feels like they are being heard and part of the campus community could increase student retention and persistence. Research has also shown that an increased sense of belonging affects alumni engagement. Drezner & Pizmony-Levy (2021) researched the correlation between sense of belonging to one's graduate alma mater and philanthropic giving and alumni engagement. While this study focuses on graduate school alumni, it is possible that a similar outcome is true for undergraduate alumni as well. Drezner & Pizmony-Levu (2021) concluded from their study that "Alumni with a higher Sense of Belonging are more likely to engage with their graduate alma mater through helping students, participating in events, and volunteering time" (p. 17) as well as "give to the graduate school" (p. 15). There are many

reasons why student government and having a connected student government and student body is important. In the next section I discuss why this topic is important to me.

Who I Am and Connection to My Concern

I was never a part of an SGO; however, I had many people I was close with involved in student government at my undergraduate institution, East Stroudsburg University of Pennsylvania (ESU). While I was at ESU, the SGO was called Student Senate (they have since changed it to Student Government Association). Throughout my undergraduate experience, I realized many issues with the Student Senate at ESU. Prior to my junior year, I had no idea what the Student Senate did. The people that I knew in the organization seemed like they even had a hard time explaining it other than saying "they are the advocates for the student body." *But what does that even mean?* Most other students that I talked to during all four years of college did not know what the student government did either. If they were involved in a student organization on campus, they usually just saw that as the entity that gives them their budget (rather gives them less of a budget than they requested). Many other students expressed their dislike for the student government. They said things such as "they only serve themselves", "they do not take feedback from students who are not in it", "they think they are better than other students," etc. Overall, I noticed a disconnect between the student government, and the students they were supposed to be serving.

In addition to a few friends and peers, two of my good friends and roommates had major roles in the Student Senate during our junior year. One of them served as the Finance Chair and oversaw the student organization budgets and allocating student activities fee funds to those organizations. The other one was the President of the Student Senate (and served as the Finance Chair the year prior). Because of this, I had close connections with the Student Senate and gained

some knowledge of what was going on. However, I still felt like I could not describe what they did or their purpose. My fiancé was also highly involved on campus like I was and were good friends and roommates with the same two friends. When asked if he could explain to me what the Student Senate did, he replied "I couldn't tell you. I know they have a lot of meetings" (I. Brown, personal communication, January 2021). He then went on to ask: "Who were they meeting with? How were they using 'my voice' and what I wanted and cared about in these meetings?" (I. Brown, personal communication, January 2021). If my fiancé and I, two highly involved students with major connections to the SGO on our campus, struggle(d) with knowing what SGOs do and what they did on our campus, imagine the experience of a less involved student with no connections to student government. That type of student makes up the majority of the student body.

When I first began to ponder this topic and consider it for this thesis proposal, I was not sure if this was an ESU specific issue or not. After talking to a classmate and reviewing the literature, I found that this disconnect exists on many other campuses as well.

Related Identities

There are three main identities I possess now or possessed in college that give me an interesting perspective on this topic. In this section I will talk about each identity and the perspective it gives me when thinking about this thematic concern.

First-generation College Student. The first is that I am a first-generation college student. A first-generation college student is typically described as either a student whose parents never attended a college or university or whose parents do not have a bachelor's degree. According to RTI International (2019), as of the 2015-16 academic year, first-generation college students (students whose parents do not have a bachelor's degree) make up about 56% of all

college students and 24% of all college students had parents with no postsecondary education at all. While that data is about six years old, the 2015-16 academic year was my sophomore year of college, and I was a part of that 24% of students. I only have one parent, my mom, who comes from a large family with many brothers and sisters. She and one other sibling were the only ones to graduate from high school (and she did this while pregnant and becoming a mother to me at 17 years old). Going to college was something she always wanted for me, but I never felt pressure from my family. When I did decide to go, I did not realize the disadvantage I was at as compared to my peers whose parents did go to college (continuing-generation college students). According to The Center for First-generation Student Success (2017), first-generation college students "may lack the critical cultural capital necessary for college success because their parents did not attend college" (para. 5). I had next to no knowledge about SGOs and what their purpose was most of my time as an undergraduate student. This lack of knowledge could be related to me being a first-generation college student. It would be interesting to see research conducted to see what percentage of students involved in SGO are continuing-generation college students versus first-generation college students. The other 24-56% of students like me most likely face the same lack of knowledge as I did, meaning possibly more than half of students at higher education institutions do not know what SGOs are and what they do.

Socioeconomic Status. The second identity that I think relates to my knowledge and opinion on this topic is my socioeconomic status. I would identify my undergraduate self as a low-income college student and part of the lower to lower-middle class. Patton et al. (2016) explains that an "individuals' social class can dictate how and whether they access college and thrive and succeed there" (p. 245). Patton et al. (2016) also argues that low-income students are less likely to be involved in campus life and they are more likely to have at least one job while in

school. I believe that this identity had a significant impact on my college experience. Finances were a big issue for me in college. I had to work all through college, to afford things I wanted to do, and especially my rent, utilities, food, etc. Though I was heavily involved on campus, I do not believe I would have been able to be as involved as I was if it was not for my position as president of the Campus Activities Board (CAB) being a paid position. This perspective made me realize how much of a privilege it is to be able to be highly involved on campus. Many student government positions require a certain level of involvement, commitment, and time to execute the duties of the position. This means that students who may be in a similar or worse situation than I was, may not be able to get involved due to having to work more to support themselves. This creates a clear issue when it comes to representation in SGOs.

Student Leader. Lastly, the third identity that influences my knowledge and opinion on this topic is that I was a student leader on campus. I was a highly involved student leader on campus. I was on the executive board of CAB for 3 years, with the last two years being president. I was also an officer at the campus radio station for three years. I was also involved in multiple campus committees including the strategic planning committee, student union advisory committee, global week planning committee, and a few more. Because of how involved I was on campus, I got to work with many campus staff members and administrators. Being a highly involved student leader on campus helped me gain an understanding of my university and the student government on the campus. If it were not for my involvement, I do not think I would know as much as I do. The highly involved student is a small percentage of the entire student body, so many other students do not have the opportunity to gain that understanding of student government in that way.

Being a student leader also gave me the opportunity to speak with students from different "areas" of campus and gauge the perception of student government from students at different involvement levels. The students who I worked with at the radio station had a much different perception of student government than the students in CAB. The students in CAB typically knew people in student government (especially since there happened to always be at least one person on the CAB executive board that was also in student government). They also were typically more involved in student engagement than other students, spent a lot of time in the student union (where student government students also did), and worked with staff members who also worked with student government. However, there were many of us who still did not know exactly what the student government did or what their purpose was. The students at the radio station were typically involved in smaller organizations outside of the radio station if they were involved in another organization. That means they typically were given a small budget as well, and not as much as they requested. So many of them saw the student government as the "bad guys" who did not give them enough money for what they wanted to do with their organization. I was also told about how they would go to the open meetings for students and voice concerns and suggestions that never went anywhere and so the perception was that the students in student government only cared about themselves.

Preview of Thesis

This thesis is grounded in the ideas of action research, specifically critical action research. Action research is a qualitative research approach with a focus on the action that takes place or is proposed based on what is learned (Stringer, 2014). This action is intended to make change and improvements that resolve or address the issues or problems that the participants or stakeholders are confronted with (Stringer, 2014). Critical action research is a type of action

research that uses a critical theory perspective. Critical theory is an approach to research and study that has a deep concern to overcome social injustice (Max Horkheimer 1972, as cited in Kemmis, 2008). In Chapter 2, I will go more into detail about what action research and critical action research is including some of the core principles, perspectives, and steps of action research. Finally, I will discuss why action research is a good framework to use when studying topics relating to higher education and student affairs. In Chapter 2 I will also discuss my philosophy of education, higher education, and student affairs which involves the benefit of education out of the classroom.

In Chapter 3, I will discuss the student government literature that impacts my thematic concern in three sections. The first is the history of student government and its role in historical events in higher education. The second is the current state of my thematic concern including the Purpose and importance of student government, the responsibilities of SGOs, representation of the student body, lack of knowledge of student government and student government transparency, and other internal issues within SGOs. Lastly, I will discuss the topics in the student government literature that connect to student affairs including SGO advisors, administration, and sense of belonging.

In Chapter 4 I will explain my proposed intervention that I came up with to address this issue that higher education institutions around the country will hopefully be able to use to help address the issue on their campus. The intervention that I will be proposing is a Student Government Evaluation. The student government will be evaluated by both the student body and themselves. The evaluation will include a campus-wide survey, a smaller focus group, and a self-evaluation survey. In Chapter 5, I will recommend implementation strategies as well as how the student government evaluation has assessment built right in it.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I introduced my thematic concern: the issues that SGOs are facing are causing a disconnect between student government and the student body. I also shared how I came to this topic as well as how my identities relate and inform my thematic concern. Finally, I outlined each chapter of this thesis.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework

In this chapter I begin by discussing my philosophy of education and what I believe the purpose of education is. I also explain what I believe student affairs' role in education is, specifically relating to my philosophy and purpose of education. I also discuss the research methodology that this thesis is grounded in, action research.

Philosophy and Purpose of Education

I believe that the purpose of higher education is to pave the path towards employment while also helping students learn to care for others and inspire them to contribute to society. I believe that higher education institutions can achieve this by providing a robust education in and out of the classroom. When people think about "being college educated" they typically consider someone holding a college degree. Degrees are earned by completion of credits, which typically come from passing classes. Because of this correlation, many people relate education with classes. This can cause people to believe that education only happens in the classroom. I believe that this is not true; education also happens outside of the classroom and that it can often be more impactful than that in an academic setting.

Classroom education is often measured in some way through a set of standards or grades. There is an expectation for what knowledge the students should have at a certain point in time. Yet when learning through unrestricted experiences and interactions there are no expectations. Education in this form happens naturally and sometimes unknowingly. People often do not even know they were educated until they are put into a similar situation again and they realize that they have the knowledge needed to handle that situation. When in a classroom, students are often taking in information with the purpose to get the correct answers on a test, and that is the determining factor of if they are educated. This limits the student's "capacity to act intelligently

in new situations" (Dewey, 1938, pp. 26-27) because the education they are receiving is often not transferable to the world outside of academia. This type of education can often also be boring and unenjoyable to students (Dewey, 1938). When the education that students are receiving is not enjoyable, it causes students to be uninterested. This can cause issues for students as they struggle to pay attention, do the required readings, study, and ultimately do well on the tests. Struggling like that in classes can cause students to feel like failures and that education is not for them.

Education that students obtain from outside of the classroom through experiences and interactions that are more democratic are more enjoyable and promote a better quality of life (Dewey, 1938, p. 34). People are shaped by interacting with their environment, which includes learning from others and through communication. Freire (2000) believes strongly in being educated this way. He states that "only through communication can human life hold meaning" (p. 77). Freire (2000) continues to describe "authentic thinking, thinking that is concerned about reality, does not take place in ivory tower isolation, but only in communication" (p. 77). The type of education that often happens in classrooms is not how authentic thinking occurs. To think critically and authentically, education should focus on communicating and interacting with others. Education from outside of the classroom through democratic interactions is "education as the practice of freedom – as opposed to education as the practice of domination" (Freire, 2000, p. 81). When students are in situations where they are free to learn at their own pace, from their own situations, and with no judgments or standards, the education they receive will be more beneficial to them in future situations. They are the ones who hold the power in their own education and their own lives. They will be willing to learn more, which will, in turn, help them learn even more than perhaps expected.

The education that students receive from opportunities outside of the classroom is a beneficial part of college. It is unfortunate that there is a lack of funding to student affairs programs, which then causes a lack of diverse educational experiences for students. It is vital for students to have the opportunities for education outside of their typical classroom, as it will help them be more prepared for other situations after (and during) their academic career. Higher education institutions should strive to provide the best education possible for their students, and that cannot be done without providing opportunities for students to learn outside of the typical classroom.

Role of Student Affairs Professionals

The work of student affairs professionals is often to provide students with educational opportunities outside of the classroom as well as provide support to students during their education endeavors. The support that student affairs professionals provide includes emotional, academic, and physical support. This is provided through offices such as multicultural centers, LGBTQ+ support/advocacy offices, wellness offices, career centers, etc. The educational opportunities that they provide include leadership positions in clubs/organizations, Resident Assistant jobs, conferences, and workshops. Some of the clubs and organizations also provide students with opportunities to experience things such as event planning, marketing, and supervising/leadership. Some clubs and organizations can also provide direct job/interest related experience, such as, radio shows, TV stations, theater productions, etc. These opportunities provide students the space to learn for themselves through working with other students, working with outside contractors, and working with university employees. Participating in and interacting with student government organizations (SGOs) is a great way to experience the things listed above. It provides the students in the SGO the opportunity to learn about their campus, being an

elected official, how to help others, etc. Students who interact with the SGO are also experiencing an educational experience such as learning where to go to advocate for their needs, how to interact with elected officials and to hold them accountable, etc. The skills gained and knowledge received will better correlate to experiences that they will encounter in their personal life during and after their time in college.

Action Research Methodology

This thesis, and my later discussed intervention, is grounded in the ideas of action research, specifically critical action research. Utilization of action research can be seen back in the early labor-organizations in the US and Europe (Brydon-Miller et al., 2003, p. 11). It was also utilized in the US during early WWII (Greenwood & Levin, 2007). Action research is a type of qualitative research that strives to gain a better understanding of problems, concerns, or questions that people regularly encounter and to find effective solutions to those problems, concerns, or questions (Stringer, 2014). Action research is special from other types of research because there is a focus on the *action* that takes place from what is learned during the research. This action is intended to make changes and improvements that resolve the issues or problems that the participants or stakeholders are confronted with (Stringer, 201 Stakeholders in an action research project are anyone who's lives will be affected by the outcome of the research project (Brydon-Miller et al., 2003; Stringer, 2014). Stringer (2014) states, "If an action research project does not make a difference for practitioners or their clients, then it has failed to achieve its objective" (pp. 10-11). The goal is to improve the lives and well-being of the participants or stakeholders (Stringer, 2014). It "does not resolve all problems but provides a means for people to more clearly understand their situations and to formulate effective solutions to the problems they face" (Stringer, 2014, p. 8). Stringer (2014) also affirms the change or action that is made

through practices, programs, procedures, or services should acquire and keep the interest of the participants and stakeholders. If they are unsuccessful in doing this, the project is "ineffective, inefficient, or both" (p. 73).

Action research is also special in the way of being a "collaborative approach to investigation that seeks to engage 'subjects' as equals and full participants in the research process" (Stringer, 2014, p. 14). When completing an action research project, the stakeholders *and* the researchers actively participate together. The researcher does not participate as an 'expert' or make it seem like they are in authority. Instead, the researcher participates as a resource person (Stringer, 2014, p. 20). Participants and stakeholders are an important part of the research process, and they are included in all aspects of the process including creating the changes and solutions. "By sharing their diverse knowledge and experience, stakeholders can create solutions to their problems and improve the quality of their community life" (Stringer, 2014, p. 15). Brydon-Miller et al. (2003) also mentions that "human systems can only be understood and changed if one involves the members of the system in the inquiry process itself" (pp. 13-14).

Action research also has a strong focus on community. It seeks to foster a sense of community between the participants through honest interactions. Not only that, it is also based on localized studies (Stringer, 2014). It is "based on the proposition that generalized solutions, plans, or programs may not fit all contexts or groups to whom they are applied, and the purpose is to find an appropriate solution for the particular dynamics at work in a local situation" (Stringer, 2014, p. 6).

Critical action research is a type of action research that uses a critical theory perspective. Max Horkheimer (1972, as cited in Kemmis, 2008, p. 125) described critical theory as "a form of

theorizing motivated by a deep concern to overcome social injustice and the establishment of more just social conditions for all people" (pp. 242-243). Critical action research is accomplished by a group of people coming together to modify and transform practices in their communal social world through individual and collective self-formation (Kemmis et al., 2014, p. 20). Kemmis et al. (2014) stresses that critical action research focuses on real, concrete practices, not abstract practices. Through this form of research, people recognize how their practices are shaped by and are responses to particular circumstances that relate to a particular place and moment in history.

Higher education and student affairs work focuses on the students who attend their college or university. According to the CAS General Standards (2019), "mission statements [in higher education] must reference learning and development" (Part 1). This verifies that higher education and student affairs work, programs, and services are focused on student's personal growth and improvement. Higher education and student affairs work is meant to serve students, so choosing a research method that includes students and has a goal of development or improvement for them in mind and at the forefront, helps achieve that.

The most important part of action research and what sets it apart from other research approaches is the action piece of it. Performing research that provides an action piece is important in the higher education and student affairs field. Since their goal is to serve student's learning and development, and students' needs are changing and expanding all the time, action is needed to update and/or create services and programs to help achieve that goal. Action research, and qualitative research in general, recognizes the complexities of human systems and interaction. This aids in studying students because of their plethora of identities, backgrounds, behaviors, lifestyles, etc.

Conclusion

In this chapter I discussed my philosophy of education, what I believe the purpose of education is, and the role that student affairs plays in that. I also discussed action research, which is the research methodology that this thesis is grounded in and my intervention is inspired by. The next chapter will go more in depth into my thematic concern, SGO's disconnect to their constituents–the student body.

Chapter 3: Literature Review

In this chapter, I use relevant literature to discuss different parts of student government. The first section includes the history of student government. The history section includes how student government came to be and transformed through the years as well as concerns of the disconnects between them and the student body. The next section describes the current state of student government and the issues that are happening in student government organizations (SGOs). Finally, the last section discusses the connection between my thematic concern and student affairs. This final section includes relationship to administration, student government advisors, and student's sense of belonging on campus.

History of Student Government

Student government, or student self-governance, has been a part of American higher education since the early days (May, 2010; Miles et al., 2011). The location of the first student government is debated between the College of William and Mary and the University of Virginia (Klopf, 1960, as cited in May, 2010, p. 207; May, 2010). However, Frederick (1965) and McKown (1944) report that the College of William and Mary is the first in the year 1779. McKown (1944) mentions that at the beginning the students only handled "general improvement" and "routine discipline" at the College of William and Mary (p. 11). University of Virginia was the most liberal higher education institution in the world when it opened in 1819 and student self-government "that went far beyond that of William and Mary College" was included in its opening (McKown, 1994, p. 11). McKown (1994) claims that American independence from England and the emerging ideal of democracy was the driving force behind the first student governments. More and more students in higher education institutions were "dissatisfied by the lack of power and control they had over their own lives" (May, 2010, p.

208). “A combination of the need for extracurricular outlets, disengagement with the academic curriculum, dissatisfaction with institutional rules and disciplinary procedures, and a desire for student empowerment” (May, 2010, p. 208) is why students began to organize themselves and create the early student self-governance.

Through the Years

May (2010) explains the stages and types of student self-governance that emerged through the years to get to where it is today. Students reacting to negative campus environments and poor conditions went off campus to discuss concerns led to the creation of this first type of student self-governance (Miller & Nadler, 2006; Rentz, 2004). Literary Societies were the first kind of student self-governance, “established by students to channel their institutional frustrations” (May, 2010, p. 209). While this helped provide a voice for students and facilitated a way for students to become involved educationally and socially, students were still “frustrated with the lack of authority over their own lives” (May, 2010, pp. 209-210). Students created student-led honor systems to try to gain that authority over themselves.

With time, students became successful creating codes of behavior and holding themselves to those standards and higher education institutions began to allow students to have some authority over their own lives. Honor systems grew throughout the 1800s. In the 18th and 19th centuries Student Assemblies came about which consisted of the entire student body at an institution coming together to “discuss and vote on matters of concern” (May, 2010, p. 210). Student Assemblies worked well because of the small number of students on campus. As higher education institutions grew in size and became more diverse in terms of gender, socioeconomic status, fields of study, and co-curricular involvement, students desired to label and classify

themselves with their close peers in their class. This caused the creation of Class Councils in the late 1800s and early 1900s.

According to May (2010), class councils were only popular from about 1875 to 1925 as students began to identify more with their involvement and less with their class (p. 211). However, according to the United States National Student Association (NSA) (1955), class governments still existed in the 1950s at 68% of 486 higher education institutions they surveyed. They did mention that Protestant and Catholic colleges were more likely to have class governments than public and private non-denominational colleges (NSA, 1955, p. 8). Student Councils also emerged during the early 1900s and were "not only an agent for the student body to voice their agenda to the institution's administration, but it was also the adjudicator of their peers' transgressions" (May, 2010, p. 212). Finally, "by the middle of the twentieth century, student self-governance organizations on college and university campuses evolved into its current (as of 2010) form: the student associations" (May, 2010, p. 212). Student Associations serve as the voice of the student body to administrators and often resemble the national system of government. Responsibilities include "overseeing student fees, supervising student organizations, and running campus programming" (May, 2010, p. 212).

"It was not until the twentieth century that Americans finally decided to break with the European tradition of education that student government became a wide-spread way of college life" (Frederick, 1965, p. 7). However, some higher education institutions were slow to catch on. In a survey of 270 higher education institutions published in 1928, only 99 institutions had some form of student self-governance and 42 of those 99 institutions' SGOs only put on student activities (Johnson, 1928, p. 166). The President of Centenary College in Louisiana, Geo. S. Saxton, was quoted as saying:

> We do not have the so-called student government. We believe that the faculty and administration should do something other than teach. If the students were able to govern the institution, they should be occupying places on the faculty or in the administration. We have few rules. The student, to remain [at the college], must show himself a gentleman or lady; must meet his obligations; and must perform his duties… We do not have any trouble. (Johnson, 1928 p. 168)

Frederick (1965) says that "by the middle of the [twentieth] century practically all the schools and colleges in America recognized the practical and theoretical values of systematic participation on the part of students in the management of their affairs" (pp. 7-8). NSA (1955) also mentions the significant "movement that encourages students to assume important tasks of self-government" gaining momentum in the first half of the twentieth century (p. 3). The progressive attitude of student learning by doing and education as preparation for life. Frederick (1965) believes it had full play in the newer American system of student activities, and especially in student responsibility for self-government (p. 7). The Stanford Student Leadership Seminar (SSLS) (1938) explains this type of educational ideal by saying "students are the product of their own experiences…they can learn to cooperate only by cooperating, to select leaders only by selecting leaders, to plan only by planning, to evaluate their own behavior only by evaluating their own behavior, etc." (p. 10). This educational ideal was something that the NSA (1955) was also promoting. They believed that colleges should provide students opportunities to gain "social skills and experience needed in adult life" in addition to technical and intellectual skills taught in their current curriculum" (p. 3).

Inclusion of Underrepresented Groups. Women and marginalized communities were underrepresented in higher education until the second half of the twentieth century (May, 2010).

***Women*.** Female students began to be admitted into co-educational higher education institutions around the late 1800s and early 1900s, but they did not get to experience the same social or academic experiences as the male students, so they created their own self-governance and clubs (May, 2010, p. 214-215). However, these were seen as less than the ones run by males (May, 2010, p. 215). Women participating in student government, clubs, and sports at all women colleges were thriving though (May, 2010). NSA (1955) explains that women student governments at these institutions were often given more freedoms in governing themselves than male student governments. This was because young women were "considered more docile and trustworthy, less in revolt against authority" (p. 5).

Due to the impacts of World War II and the Civil Rights Movement, as well as college life becoming more complex and diverse, women were allowed "entry to the reign of the college both academically and socially" starting in the 1940s (May, 2010, p. 215). This caused women's student government and organizations to dwindle, as they were allowed into the previously male run organizations (May, 2015). However, this does not mean that women did not continue to face misogyny and marginalization as their involvement in student government increased (Broadhurst, 2019; Miller & Kraus, 2004). Sterling (2010) received sexist remarks such as "this is State…girls just don't become Student Body President" and that her role was to "get married, make babies, and stay at home" while running for and serving as North Carolina State University's student body president in 1970 (as cited in Broadhurst, 2019, p. 32). The lack of women in leadership positions in student government continued into the 2000s (Miller & Kraus, 2004). A study published in 2004 showed that while women held just under half of the positions in student government, 71.4% of both student government presidents and vice presidents' positions were held by men (Miller & Kraus, 2004). Miller & Kraus (2004) explain that

"women's experiences in student government, theoretically, parallel women's participation in politics in general" (p. 423). Based on this theory, it could be assumed that this continues to be a trend through today since the United States has not yet had a female president and just elected their first female vice president in 2021.

***Marginalized Communities*.** Members of marginalized communities, including Jewish people and Asians, began to be admitted into higher education institutions in the early to mid 1800s, but many higher education institutions did not start enrolling African American students until post-Civil War (May, 2010, p. 216). "Segregation for African Americans was the accepted norm across the country, especially in the South, until the latter half of the twentieth century" (May, 2010, p. 216). The ruling of Brown vs. The Board of Education in 1954 was the beginning of the desegregation process in schools and the marginalized community population at all higher education institutions were growing. Much like how women did, members of marginalized communities, especially African Americans, who attended predominantly White institutions created and began taking active roles in their own SGOs and other student organizations which advocated for their needs (May, 2010). Again, like women ran student governments, these were "subordinate to the white-dominated, campus-wide SGOs" (May, 2010, p. 217). These organizations grew a great deal during the late 1960s and early 1970s due to the Civil Rights movement and "African American students' dissatisfaction with the lack of cultural curricula and activities at predominantly White institutions" (Peterson & Davenport, 1978, as cited in Kimbrough & Sutton, 2001, p. 31). As the Civil Rights movement became successful in campus administrators addressing social and academic concerns of marginalized communities, membership in these types of organizations "plateaued," but involvement continued in these affirming spaces (Kimbrough & Sutton, 2001, p.31). Members of marginalized communities

began joining the campus-wide SGOs, and the extent of black student involvement specifically continued to grow (Kimbrough & Sutton, 2001; May 2010). However, many of these students did not get the opportunity to hold high leadership positions, such as student body president, for a long time (May, 2010).

Other marginalized groups, such as members of the LGBTQ+ community, only relatively recently were represented in student government leadership positions. The first known openly gay student body president elected at any university was in 1971 (McConnel, 2019, as cited in Goodman, 2021a). This student, and many other openly gay student body presidents through the 2000s, received backlash and hateful remarks during their election and presidency (Goodman, 2021a).

National Associations. There have been two main national associations that exist specifically for SGOs in the United States. The United States National Student Association (NSA) was founded in 1947 (Welsh, n.d.). Created at a conference at the University of Wisconsin, NSA was "a confederation of American college and university student governments" (Welsh, n.d., Abstract). NSA came to fruition after a group of students went to the World Student congress in Prague, Czechoslovakia and realized there was not a national group for student governments in the United States (Welsh, n.d.). Some of the original goals of NSA were "improving student governments, promoting higher quality education, encouraging international relations, and recognition of student responsibilities" (Welsh, n.d.) as well as having a focus on student-power and student participation in decision-making (Editorial Projects for Education, 1969, as cited in Miller & Nadler, 2006). NSA received support from major outside organizations. From the early 1950s until 1967, the group had support from the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) (Welsh, n.d.). In 1954, the Ford Foundation provided a research grant

to NSA for research into “student participation in college policy-making” (United States National Student Association [NSA], 1955, p. ix). In 1978, NSA merged with the National Student Lobby to form the United States Student Association (USSA) (Library of Congress [LOC], 2019; Welsh, n.d.). The USSA focuses on college student political activism, not specifically student government (LOC, 2019; United State Student Association, n.d.).

In 2004, the American Student Government Association (ASGA) was founded by the editors of Student Leader Magazine (American Student Government Association [ASGA], 2022). The editors “determined that there was a need for an organization devoted exclusively to Student Governments and providing them with networking, research, and training resources” (ASGA, 2022). ASGA, to this day, provides their member institutions with conferences, workshops, research, private consulting, resources, and support (ASGA, 2022; Smith et al., 2016).

Student Activism in the 1960s and 1970s. Student Activism has been a part of higher education and student government since nearly its foundation (Altbach & Peterson, 1971; Mintz, 2021). “Students repeatedly sought to assert their rights, including the right to a voice in campus governance, a right to privacy and free speech and freedom of expression, and a right to live and organize free of administrative oversight” (Mintz, 2021, para. 7). However, the 1960s is known as “the age of student activism” (Rentz, 2004, p.46). Before the 1960s, colleges and universities followed the doctrine of in loco parentis to govern and control students’ lives (Carlton, 2020). Meaning in place of parents in Latin, this meant universities and their employees acted as if they were parents of the students and could regulate students' personal lives, including curfews and freedom of speech (Carlton, 2020; Lee, 2011). Rentz (2004) claims the 1960s was the “downfall of in loco parentis” (p. 46). While universities were telling their employees to control student

behavior, students were protesting for more rights for students in general as well as participating in civil rights protests (Ferguson, 2017; Lee, 2011; Rentz, 2004). In the 1960s and 1970s, students were protesting and marching about civil rights, the Vietnam War, the draft, Kent State Shootings, student rights, and for campus administrators to listen to their students (among other individualized issues) (Broadhurst, 2019; Ferguson, 2017; Miller & Nadler, 2006). Students also felt that their institution's focus and their studies were irrelevant to the real-world issues going on that concerned them (Broadhurst, 2019; Ferguson, 2017).

The current form of student government is attributed to the student activism in the 1960s and 1970s (Miles et al., 2011). "While many of the individuals who led campus protests were informal leaders, or students without a positional leadership role, some students merged their identities as activists with the role of student body president" (Broadhurst, 2019, p. 25). Student activists typically had to work outside of the system and were limited in their reach to the campus community to gain support and participation. But students who were in positional leadership roles such as student body presidents, "had the visibility on campus to reach greater numbers of students that many informal leaders did not possess" (Broadhurst, 2019, p. 27). These student body presidents also used their positional leadership and connections to campus administrators to do things such as use funding from the student government to get buses to protests in Washington D.C., and propose and get approved alternative grading policies for students so they could continue to participate in the protests and activism (Broadhurst, 2019). These student activists held other peaceful protests such as strikes, marches, teach-ins, demonstrations, and distributing flyers (Broadhurst, 2019).

Student Trustees (student members of higher education governing boards) also arose due to student activism and the new view of students being thought of as adults (Lozano, 2020;

Rentz, 2004). In the 1960s, student activists pushed for student members to be a part of higher education governing boards (Lozano, 2020). "[Student] activists believed that by adding student members [to higher education governing boards], there would be a guarantee that student views and opinions would be integrated into a decision-making process that they believed disenfranchised them, effectively making student board members a bridge between students at large and high level bodies in higher education" (Lozano, 2020, pp. 1879). They hoped that when decisions would be made, they would be made with a better understanding of student issues and what would be in the best interest of students (Lozano, 2020). Students began to be added to student governing boards as Student Trustees in the 1960s and 1970s (Davis, 2006; Lozano, 2020).

Disconnect and Evaluation

There is not much literature that exists that discusses the history of my specific student government focuses including disconnect and evaluation. I was able to find two books from around the mid-20th century that mention students' view of student government or student government evaluation.

Student's View of Student Government. In a study done by NSA (1955), they found some information about students' current view of student government and what affects that view. When criticizing their student government, most complaints were about the student government not accomplishing anything (p. 37). However, both the student leaders in student government and the administrators of the institutions, believe that the student body's impression "rests on ignorance, that student government in fact does much more than its constituency may think (NSA, 1955, p. 40). Some students also felt that student government leaders have "their own ambitions in mind rather than the interest of the student body" as well as being "a tool or puppet

of the administration" (NSA, 1955, p. 37). "The student body tends to be suspicious both of the administration and of the leaders of student government" (NSA, 1955, p. 39). In terms of what the student body required to support or feel highly of student government, they based this on how well the student government improved on their responsibilities, not just if they did them (NSA, 1955).

Evaluation. "Evaluation has always been considered an important part of educational procedure, but until recently (1944), most of it was concerned with immediate objectives, ability to spell, work problems, write legibly, and recall memorized material; very little was concerned with the ultimate results in the lives and activities of adults" (McKown, 1944, p. 317). McKown (1944) explains that a reason for the "neglect of evaluation (or at least neglect of publication) in the extracurricular field" is because these evaluations would be based on opinions rather than scientific measurements (p. 318). When evaluating student governments, who is doing the evaluation should be "everyone who is directly or indirectly affected or influenced by it" (p. 335). This includes the student body, student organizations, and the council themselves. McKown (1944) also gives multiple ways that these evaluations could be conducted. These include questionnaires, checklists, record of participation, and case studies. McKown (1944) also emphasizes the importance of creating a plan for improvement after the evaluation, or the evaluation "is not an appraisal worthy of the name" (p. 343).

Current State of the Concern

Purpose and Importance of Student Government

SGOs are organizations that are "of, by, and for students" (Frederick, 1965, p. 8) to "represent the student community as a whole" (NSA, 1955, p.7). These SGOs make sure that students have a voice and serve as that "student voice" to administration (ASGA, n.d., as cited in

Goodman, 2021b; Laosebikan-Buggs, 2006; Miles, 2011). In addition to serving as the student voice, SGOs advocate for students needs and issues and make decisions for the welfare of the campus (Laosebikan-Buggs, 2006; Workman et al., 2020) among other duties that will be discussed in the next section. “Student government is poised to play a significant role in shaping the quality of student life at the university” (Laosebikan-Buggs, 2006, p. 2).

Student government also provides great experience and opportunities for the students involved in SGOs. Involvement in SGOs “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, as cited in Miles et al., p. 171). SGOs provide opportunities “for students to understand how to care for, think about and steward the interests of others” (Smith et al., 2016, p. 47) as well as give them the responsibility of making informed decisions about the campus (Laosebikan-Buggs, 2006; Miles, 2011; Miles et al., 2011). SGOs provide real life experiences and involvement for students to learn from (Miller & Nadler, 2006). The SSLS (1938) explains that “Students are the product of their own experiences” (p. 10). It is also important to note that it is a great opportunity for students who are interested in going into public office. Many notable people in public office in the United States, past and present, once served on their institution’s student government organization (Frederick, 1965; Goodman, 2022).

Student government also provides learning opportunities for students in the student body not involved in the student government organization. “Students are the product of their own experiences” (SSLS, 1938, p. 10). Students learn to be citizens, select leaders, and hold governments accountable through practicing in college (Frederick, 1965; SSLS, 1938). Students also learn that “good government is something which must constantly be striven for and that the

type of government under which they live is determined by the degree to which they themselves function intelligently as electors and in formulating and maintaining a campus opinion which will not tolerate indifferent or bad government" (SSLS, 1938, p. 10). Through residing under their student government organization on campus, students are enabled to learn how to select knowledgeable and adequate leaders (SSLS, 1938).

For administrators of higher education institutions, SGOs provide a way for them to learn about the student experience and the campus well-being (Smith et al., 2016). With student government being the voice of the students, administrators can listen to the students' concerns by just meeting with a few individuals who were elected by the students.

Student Government Responsibilities

The responsibilities of SGOs vary and are unique to each campus (Laosebikan-Buggs, 2006; Miles, 2011). These responsibilities are determined both by their constitution and the power given to them by the university or university governing board (Laosebikan-Buggs, 2006). Some of the common responsibilities/issues of concern include: funding and recognition of student organizations (Goodman, 2021b; Laosebikan-Buggs, 2006; Miles, 2011), student fee allocation (Goodman, 2021b; Goodman et al., 2021; Laosebikan-Buggs, 2006), raising of tuition (Goodman 2021b; Laosebikan-Buggs, 2006; Miles et al., 2011), student safety (Goodman, 2021b; Miles et al., 2011), and residence life and housing policies (Goodman, 2021b; Goodman et al., 2021; Miles, 2011). SGOs may also do work on other issues including on campus sexual assault, mental health, free speech, smoking on campus, library hours, parking, social justice issues, and other campus policies (Goodman, 2021b; Goodman et al., 2021; Laosebikan-Buggs, 2006; Miles, 2011; Miles et al., 2011).

Being involved in student government provides students an opportunity to learn about the above issues and policies and how they affect their, and other student's, everyday lives. Students involved also get to not only vote and make decisions about these issues and policies (Goodman et al., 2021), but also use their power to advocate for solutions to these issues and the enhancement of student's experience on campus (Laosebikan-Buggs, 2006; Miles et al., 2011; Soled & Goel, 2020). Student government involvement often provides students with a "seat at the table" (Goodman, 2021b). Goodman (2021b) describes a seat at the table as a "Space for students on committees, and with access to university administrators" (p. 38). But what seat they are given and what table the seat is at matters.

Having a seat at the table could provide students information before the rest of the campus or give the students opportunities to give their opinions or even make decisions on things. However, what table students are invited to is important. One student in Goodman's (2021b) study brought up a good point in asking "am I invited to the Homecoming planning committee, or am I invited to hiring our new Dean?" (p. 38). Some students also feel that their seat at the table is sometimes just a placeholder or that since they only have that seat for a short amount of time, they lack historical context or are not taken as a serious member of the committee (Goodman, 2021b, p. 38).

Some student government members can serve as a student Trustee on their higher education governing board and "gain access to the highest level of institutional and system decision-making" (Goodman et al., 2021, p. 144). As mentioned above, Student Trustee positions came about in the 1960s from student activism and "[student] activists believed that by adding student members [to higher education governing boards], there would be a guarantee that student views and opinions would be integrated into a decision-making process that they

believed disenfranchised them, effectively making student board members a bridge between students at large and high level bodies in higher education" (Lozano, 2020, pp. 1879). Interestingly though, in Lozano's (2020) study, when a student government organization had a Student Trustee position, it made little impact on the engagement, communication, or relationship between the higher education governing board and the student government organization. Student governments who did not have a Student Trustee were more likely to believe that the higher education government board values their views (Lozano, 2020). Not all students on higher education governing boards have voting privileges either (Davis, 2006). Davis (2006) argues that "little evidence can be found that higher education governance has progressed beyond 'tokenism'" (p. 90). While students have a seat at the table, "it is clear that their votes still remain marginal and their voices lonely among many more members with real authority" (Davis, 2006, p. 90). This aligns with the students from Goodman's (2021b) study when they mentioned they often felt that their seat at the table is just a placeholder.

What Are They Actually Doing? In a study done by Smith et al. (2016), they mention some issues that student government took on that include "campus life and business issues, academic procedures, social issues, and self-government regulation" (p. 49). Within these broad topics some of the more specific things include walking trails, inclement weather policy, safe and reliable evening transportation, approving classes, revising liberal arts core, approving regulations for enrollment in dual majors, registering students to vote (pp. 49-50). These issues Smith et al. (2016) describe as "meaningful issues that potentially impact the lives of students on campus" (p. 50). However, the majority of the discussion and voting involved allocating student fee money to student organizations and other programs. Smith et al. (2016) claim that the extensive amount of time and arguing that the SGOs spend on this shows a policy problem. A

better protocol should be in place to ensure “decisions would be made in a more fair and equitable manner, and without the time commitment” (p. 50).

Mackey (2006) also found in their study that most of the responsibilities of the SGOs were dedicated to organizational maintenance including funding, auditing, and monitoring. None of the SGOs listed student organization maintenance in their purpose or mission, which Mackey (2006) calls a “disconnect between the purpose and the function of student governance” (p. 66). The missions of SGOs are not what is guiding the function on them, and they appear to be functioning “without a defined guiding purpose” (p. 67). Laosebikan-Buggs (2006) also found that while advocacy is a purpose many SGOs claim, the role of advocacy is almost non-existent in most SGOs. Advocacy in SGOs is typically limited to “the issues of concern to the officers and the body, with little regard to the average student” (p. 3).

Representation of the Student Body

“Representation by students is important to the operation of the campus and the identity development of students” (Smith et al., 2016, p. 46). Most SGOs are intended to be representative of the student body that elects them, or their constituency, with the intent to represent the wishes and issues of concern of the student body (Laosebikan-Buggs, 2006). SGOs are set up to be a representative democracy – a small group of people elected to represent the broad interest of many – in this case the students in the student government organization make decisions that reflect those whom they represent (Smith et al., 2016). However, it is often the case that SGOs, especially at the executive board level, are not representative of the student body (Goodman et al., 2021; Miller & Nadler, 2006; Naylor et al., 2020; Workman et al., 2020). The Executive Director and founder of ASGA, Butch Oxedine, was quoted in a Chronical of Higher Education article saying, “student governments all over the country are not representative

generally of their students" (Adedoyin, 2021, para. 11). Brooks et al. (2015) also explains that being elected into student government positions often rely heavily on social circles (as cited in Naylor et al., 2020).

"Students enter higher education with a multitude of identities" (Goodman, 2021a, p. 10), however students who participate in SGOs tend to be less diverse (Miller & Nadler, 2006). "Predominately white student organizations such as student government, specifically, maintain hidden and exclusionary support networks used by dominant groups to secure leadership positions" (Jones & Reddick, 2017, p. 215 as cited in Goodman, 2022, pp. 28-29). According to Miller & Nadler (2006), students who traditionally participate in SGOs are "those with the highest investment in campus activities, and are most likely to be of the traditional 18-24 year-old age" (p. 12). Naylor et al. (2020) also mentions that many students face things such as structural, financial, or family barriers that potentially excludes them from being able to participate in student government, which means their voices and concerts are often excluded from conversations.

According to the United States Department of Education (2016), women outnumber men in higher education institutions and the percentage of women is expected to grow over the next decade (as cited in Workman et al., 2020). Despite there being more women going to college than men, they are not seeing the same representation in the student body president position (Workman et al., 2020). According to ASGA (2016), only about 15% of women serve in this role at four-year higher education institutions (as cited in Workman et al., 2020).

According to Goodman et al. (2021), "generations of student leaders with underrepresented identities have often been tapped for diversity-oriented positions in student government instead of being considered for a wider range of roles" (p. 146). These diversity roles

may not be at the executive board or cabinet level, which can cause an “artificial barrier” to these students running for a position such as student body president (Goodman et al., 2021, p. 147). If one of these students do get elected to the president position, they may feel they are behind or unprepared as a result of having to gather institutional knowledge (Goodman et al., 2021). A student in Goodman’s (2022) study mentioned that when they got to college, they noticed that the students in student government were “privileged white kids” and that he did not see any other students who looked like him in that organization (Goodman, 2022, p. 27). Most recently, Black students and other students of color in student body president positions have also been looked to for leadership and healing during times of racial reckoning, including the murder of George Floyd and the COVID-19 pandemic which disproportionately impacts people of color, while these students are dealing with their own personal reactions (Goodman et al., 2021).

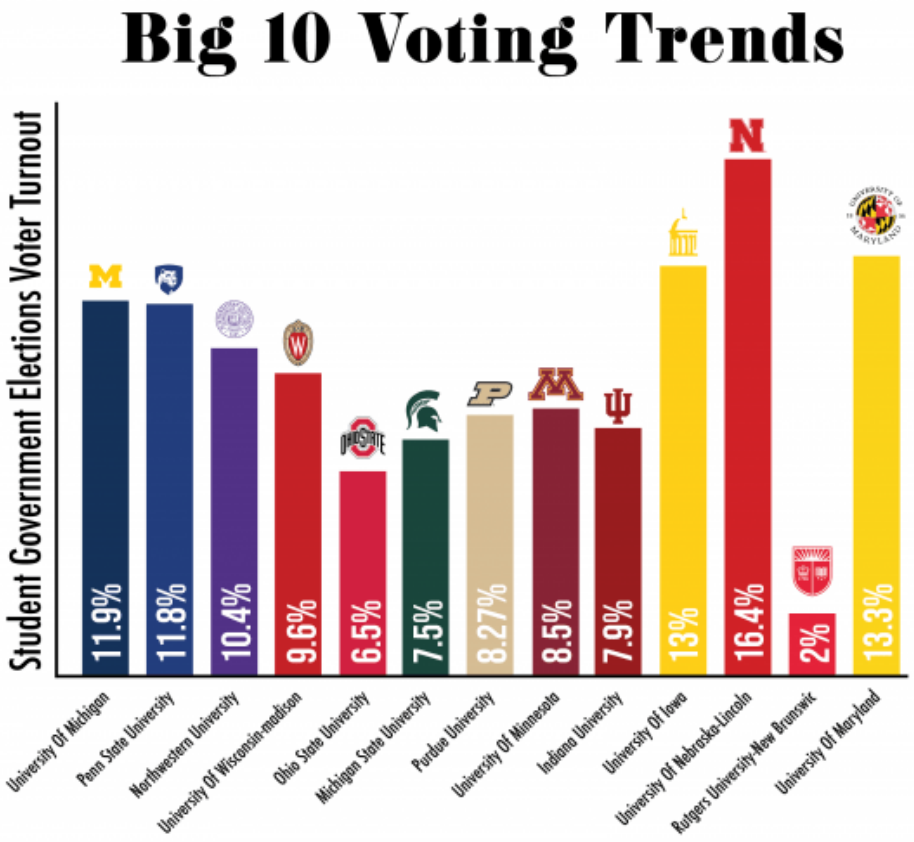
LGBTQ+ students have somewhat similar experiences. In Goodman’s (2021a) study, he found that many men were inspired into running for student government positions after seeing openly gay student government presidents and other leaders, while some were inspired by seeing the absence of this. However, many of these men in his study found they did not resonate with the praise and acknowledgement they got for being gay and in student government. They wanted to be seen as student government leaders who “just happened to be gay” and not as the gay student government leaders. They wanted to be seen as the best for the job and recognized for the great work that they were doing, not just for being an out, gay man, while still recognizing what it means for others in the LGBTQ community (Goodman, 2021a). A student in Goodman’s (2022) study stated that he felt him being an openly gay student government leader encouraged his student government to address and discuss LGBTQ+ issues and topics in discussions of

diversity and inclusion. This same student also felt that his leadership as an openly gay student government leader made it easier for people who identify similarly to run after him.

Voting in Student Government Elections. It may be possible that SGOs are not representative of the student body because of the lack of voter turnout in student government elections. The lack of voter turnout is an issue across many higher education institutions (Laosebikan-Buggs, 2006). According to a study done by Smith et al. (2016), there was an average voter turnout of 17.83% for student government elections, with 5.45% being the lowest and 34.98% being the highest. The Student Voice Index (2018) found the average voter turnout to be around 22% of the student body (as cited in Goodman, 2021b). Adedoyin (2021) claims that the average voter turnout is around 10% to 15% in an article published by the Chronicle of Higher Education and quotes Butch Oxendine, the executive director and founder of ASGA, saying "many schools are even less than that" (para. 12). According to Gupta & Rubin (2020) in an article in The Michigan Daily, the average voter turnout in student government elections at 13 of the Big Ten schools was 9.77%. As shown in figure 3.1, the highest turnout was 16.4% and the lowest was 2%. Even though these percentages vary, what they all have in common is they represent only a small portion of the student body. Laosebikan-Buggs (2006) says that the low voter turnout denies SGOs credibility with both administrators and other students. This lack of credibility "serves as a disincentive to further or enhance involvement" (p. 5).

Figure 3. 1

Big 10 Voting Trends



Note: Graph published in the *The Michigan Daily* representing student voter turnout in SGO elections (Gupta & Rubin, 2020).

Lack of Knowledge and Transparency

From personal experience, there is a lack of knowledge about SGOs and what they do in the student body, however, there seems to be little scholarly support for this observation. Planas et al.'s (2011) study in Spain does mention that only 12% of students in their study knew who their representatives are on their governing boards. This observation, however, is mentioned more frequently in individual college/university newspapers. Clark (2019), in an article

published in The Wooster Voice the student newspaper of the College of Wooster, mentions that many members of their two SGOs cited misinformed perceptions of the campus community as the cause of issues that they were having including participation and elections. Hill & Gummaraju (2021), in an article published in The Huntington News, the newspaper of Northeastern University, says that the Student Government Association "from the outside, may seem to be an amorphous group of students with a confusing internal structure" (para. 1). This article is solely about what the Student Government Association at Northeastern University is, which could be argued shows that there is a need for this type of article. Doe (2017), in an article published by The Lafayette, Lafayette College's newspaper, discusses the results of a survey that their student government organization put out to gauge the student body's views on various things involving the organization. The survey results showed that "roughly half of all participants wrote that they 'somewhat know' about student government's role and functions" (para. 5). One of the student leaders in their student government organization mentioned that the amount of confusion around the role of student government is concerning to him and "has become a major aspect of [his] agenda" (para. 3). In addition to my intervention, additional research is needed in this area of student's lack of knowledge of SGOs.

A possible reason for some of the lack of knowledge could be the lack of transparency that SGOs have. Smith et al. (2016) mention the lack of transparency of the 73 SGOs they were not able to include in the main part of their study as the "most startling element of the study" (p. 50). Those 73 SGOs did not report meeting minutes, agendas, current membership rosters, legislation listings, or reports of funding decisions. Smith et al. (2016) also mentions that the 10 SGOs that they were able to use in the study, "generally failed to provide a level of detail that would satisfy student inquiries" (p. 50). This issue is also something that came up in a university

newspaper. An article in The Prospector, University of Texas at El Paso's student newspaper, discussed the lack of transparency that their Student Government Association has (Prospector Staff, 2017). "Their website seems to lack records of multiple functions of the organization" (para. 7). Prospector Staff (2017) also mention that their non-updated roster on their website "suggests a dissonance in organizational communication" (para. 15).

Internal Issues

Internal struggles and issues can deter SGOs from effectively doing their job and fulfilling their purpose on campus (Laosebikan-Buggs, 2006). "Internal strife produces a weak, inconsistent student government, with little value to the administration, student participants, or student constituents" (Laosebikan-Buggs, 2006, p. 4). An environment filled with immature behavior, bias, mistreatment, etc. is not a space that feels safe for students to learn or a space where productive work and representation gets done (Laosebikan-Buggs, 2006; Workman et al., 2020). Internal struggles including power struggles, disorganization, or lack of enthusiasm or interest from students involved shapes the role and actions of SGOs (Laosebikan-Buggs, 2006).

Bias/Mistreatment. As mentioned early in this chapter when discussing the history of student governments, some individuals and groups, such as women and marginalized communities, experienced difficulties including bias and mistreatment. Unfortunately, these students often still experience these issues in student government today within their student government organization (Goodman, 2021a; Goodman, 2021b; Workman et al., 2020).

Women. SGOs are not immune to women feeling like they are living in a man's world. Many women in Goodman's (2021b) study felt that gender was an important factor in their student government experience. One participant in the study talked about how some people voted for her opponent based solely on the fact that he was a man, regardless that she was the most

experienced student government representative in the organization at that time. A participant also talked about losing the presidency to a man who she felt did not have the same level of commitment and work as she had. Women being compared to their male peers in student government was a common experience for students (Goodman, 2021b; Goodman, 2022; Workman et al., 2020).

Participants in Workman et al.'s (2020), Goodman's (2021b), and Goodman's (2022) studies described their SGOs as male-dominated and a toxic, "boys rule" environment. The women in Workman et al.'s (2020) study felt that this kind of environment affected their leadership and ability to make change within their organization and their higher education institution. They also felt that the men in their organization did not value their voices and that, at times, their voices were not welcomed. Participants mentioned that their leadership ability was called into questions and expressed feeling like they needed to prove the biases and assumptions incorrect. Participants in Goodman's (2022) study indicated similar experiences of the common issue of being compared to their male counterparts. One participant in this study also shared an experience where another member wrapped her gavel in a condom when she had to step out, which she believes experiences like this happened because she was a woman.

Bias and mistreatment of women in SGOs is something that can be found not only written in articles within academia, but in local news articles as well. Gendreau (2020), a writer for The Roanoke Times, shared comments from current and (recently) former student government members at Virginia Tech about the exclusion and name calling many women members faced as well as other sexist and traumatic things experienced by their female members in the organization. An article from the Chronicle of higher Education, written by Adedoyin

(2021), mentions another student involved in Virginia Tech's Student Government Association calling the organization sexist as well.

Students of Color. Students of color in SGOs also find themselves in a sometimes unwelcoming environment. A participant in Goodman's (2022) study explains that when she watched another black woman lose the race for student government president, it impacted her perception of if she could achieve that goal herself. Other participants expressed their race being used against them. One mentioned being accused of "pandering to get votes from Latinos" because she spoke Spanish in part of her speech during her election run (p. 27). Another student expressed that he was accused of being racist by a peer in student government because that student believed people were just voting for "the Black guy" (p. 27). Other participants had their race questioned and experienced other student government leaders arguing their identity because they were multiracial.

LGBTQIA+. Gay men in Goodman's (2021a) study expressed feeling like others in their student government organization wanted to control them. One participant said that he was told to "watch what he was doing, including how he acted and socialized, and with whom he was hooking up [with]" (p. 5). This participant also tells about being confronted by a fellow student government officer who tried to "police and shame his sexual behavior" (p. 5). Participants in this study felt that they needed to work much harder than their peers to "keep up or be good enough" to get praised for the same work (p. 7). Participants also said that this feeling increased if there was an intersectionality of their identity of an underrepresented race and being gay.

Bias and mistreatment of members of the LGBTQIA+ community within SGOs can also be found in local news articles. Gendreau (2020), a writer for The Roanoke Times, shares that some students felt that the Student Government Association at Virginia Tech was a "homophobic

organization" (para. 24). According to one student, many members of the LGBTQIA+ community resigned for that reason and after many experienced things "that were pretty traumatic" (para. 24).

Transition. More issues that SGOs run into is due to transition from one administration or group of leaders to another. Oftentimes when a group of leaders leave their student government organization, especially due to graduation, a lot of knowledge goes with them (Smith et al., 2016). Smith et al. (2016) explains that this is even more substantial when the student government leaders who are graduating have participated in student government since their freshman year. Presidents in Miles' (2011) study mentioned the importance of transition reports and that having a lack of documentation from the previous administration caused a rocky transition. Women in Workman et al.'s (2020) study mentioned that they faced issues with transitioning into their role due to the outgoing president not wanting to transition into the role.

Outcomes. "The public is increasingly holding higher education accountable to instill values of civic responsibility and social change in students" (Soria et al., 2013, p. 242). According to Miles et al. (2011), "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" (p. 171). This connects to the first half of what the public is holding higher education to do. However, according to the study done by Soria et al. (2013), they did not find any relationship between being involved in student governance organizations and engagement in social change. Dugan & Komives' (2010) study showed that short term leadership training programs have positive impacts on making students socially responsible leaders. Perhaps short-term leadership training is more needed in student government.

Dugan & Komives' (2010) discuss that their study provides results that experiences in college such as being a part of student government does not have a positive influence on students' values of self-consciousness, congruence, and commitment. According to Kuh & Lund (1994), the only positive outcome resulting from participating in student government was practical competence. Kuh & Lund (1994) also mention that their study yielded a negative correlation between participating in student government and altruism. "Self-awareness and enhanced appreciation and concern for the welfare of others" was not found to be had by many students in the study, which are thought to be associated with student government involvement (p. 13). Student government participation does seem to produce skills that are indicated by employers as needed for workplace competence including decision making, understanding organizational structures and processes, and teamwork (Kuh & Lund, 1994). While gaining decision making skills is great, based on the other results they may not be making those decisions with others in mind.

There are also certain standards and outcomes set by associations/organizations that campus activities, which includes student organizations and student government, are supposed to provide and uphold. According to the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) standards (2015), campus activities programming "must be to enhance the overall educational experience of students through development of exposure to, and participation in programs and activities that improve student cooperation and leadership while preparing students to be responsible advocates and citizens" (as cited in Komives, 2019, p. 15). Komives (2019) mentions that student government is one of the areas that provides an opportunity for students to have positive humanitarianism and civic engagement outcomes. Kuh & Lind (1994) did find this to be true in some students in their study. The learning experiences available

through engagement with student activities, such as student government, has supported the growing emphasis on student college outcomes (Komives, 2019).

Connection to Student Affairs

After reviewing the history and current connections to my concern I turn now to the intersection of my concern and student affairs. In this section I look at this intersection in three ways: student government's relationship with administration, student government advisors, and sense of belonging.

Relationship to Administration

For SGOs to be successful, it is important to have good relationships with administration (Goodman et al., 2021). Administration often holds or has access to institutional knowledge that can help student government leaders and their advisors execute their responsibilities, duties, and campaign platforms (Goodman et al., 2021). Goodman et al. (2021) explains that administrators "have a responsibility to ensure that student governance structures are not only functional but are also valued" (p. 149). This is achieved through communication, trustworthiness, and honesty from both sides (Goodman et al., 2021; Laosebikan-Buggs, 2006). "If the student voice is not making its way to senior administrative leaders and decision-making rooms, it is the responsibility of the campus administrator to investigate where in the organization chart the student government voice is being lost" (Goodman et al., 2021, p. 149). Working with new, retiring, or leaving administrators can be frustrating for student government leaders as it may be harder to get things done due to their different motivation or comfortability levels "given the urgency and importance of many student government initiatives" (Goodman et al., 2021, p. 147).

While SGOs having a relationship with their administration is important, it does not always seem to benefit the SGOs. Students in Goodman's (2021b) study mentioned that

administrators saw them as allies, and felt that they wouldn't fight against them, and sometimes took advantage of their relationship. Students outside of the student body also sometimes view student government leaders as "in the pocket" of administration (Goodman, 2021b, p. 39). One student government leader in the study realized that some of the language and approaches she used "deferred more to administrators than to students" (p. 39). The participants discussed how having a relationship with administrators gave them more leverage and support on campus. However, the participants also reflected on the experience as sometimes feeling like a "placeholder" and they were only at some tables because their position was required to be there.

A close relationship with administration is not something all SGO are used to however. Administrators sometimes see students as "temporal consumers" who are only on campus for a few years, while they see themselves as having long-term commitments to the higher education institution they are at (Laosebikan-Buggs, 2006, p. 5). This can "belittle the student experience and claim to involvement" (p. 5). Administrators sometimes also do not consider students legitimate stakeholders of the higher education institution, which can cause student's voices to be silenced (Naylor et al., 2020). In Laosebikan-Buggs (2006) study, a student government leader mentioned that the administration views them as disorganized, demanding, and rebellious and expects the same work and integrity from them as if it was their full-time job and not just part of their very busy student lives

Advisors

Student government advisors (referenced as advisors going forward) come in many different variations. Advisors could be staff, administrators, faculty, entry-level, senior-level, etc. (Miles, 2011). SGOs may also be advised by one individual or a team of individuals that may be a mix of the different variations, (Miles, 2011). "Depending on background, education and

experience, all individuals may approach advising differently" (Miles, p. 331). Advisors typically have institutional knowledge including legislation and policy, as well as knowledge of the student government organization (Laosebikan-Buggs, 2006; Miles, 2011). Advisors are also tasked with providing students with good learning opportunities. These learning experiences should include "navigating cultural differences, confronting inequitable and unjust systems, and fostering a sense of inclusion" within the student government organization and when working with and for other students (Peck, 2022, p. 10). Peck (2022) explains that if advisors are not doing that, then they are not preparing those students to live and work in the diverse world we are in. Advisors should address issues of inequity and inequality and directly address whiteness, racism, maleness, sexism, heteronormativity, homophobia, and transphobia "that often permeate student government(s)" (Goodman, 2022, p. 30). It is also important for advisors to find innovative ways to recruit students with underrepresented identities such as students of color, women, and LGBTQIA+ students into student government and make sure that it is a supportive and safe space for all students (Goodman, 2022). This includes "helping the diverse body of students see themselves as worthy of and possessing the capacity to help "make a difference" - and then supporting them in building the skills to do so" (Peck et al., 2022, p. 7). Advisors should work to build supportive relationships with members of the student government organization, starting when they join (Workman et al., 2020).

Supportive relationships with advisors means a lot to many student government members and leaders (Miles, 2011; Workman et al., 2020). Some participants in Workman et al.'s (2020) study found that a lack of support played a large role in how they perceived their experience. All of the women in the study found support in their advisors who were also women. Dugan & Komives' (2010) study found that socially responsible leadership was enhanced through

meaningful relationships between students and advisors. Students also often look to their advisors for motivation in their roles (Miles, 2011).

Sense of Belonging

Sense of belonging is something that many student affairs professionals strive to help their students gain and something that higher educational institutions strive to have for their institutional benefits (see Chapter 1). “Sense of belonging can generally be described as students’ perceptions of connectedness, respect, and inclusivity at their college or university” (Parker, 2021, p. 248). Sense of belonging and engagement on campus is something that goes hand in hand (Komives, 2019; Peck et al., 2022; Soled & Goel, 2020). According to Komvies (2019) “engaged students often possess a stronger sense of belonging to their campus” (p. 16). Soled & Goel (2020) explain that when students are engaged with their community (which can be their campus) it helps combat feelings of isolation. The inverse is true as well. Peck et al. (2022) and Tinto (2015) explain that a student's engagement is a reaction to if they feel included or excluded on campus and if they have a sense of community.

Mayhew et al. (2016, as cited in Komives, 2019) found that environments where students felt that faculty and the broader campus cared about them, students regularly attended campus activities with on-campus friends, and prejudice and racial discrimination were uncommon, promoted persistence and degree completion. Greater levels of sense of belonging were also found to be impacted by positive perceptions of campus diversity climate (Parker, 2021). When students feel like they are included in campus environments, they prosper by achieving higher grades and persisting at higher rates (Komives, 2019; Parker, 2021; Peck, et al. 2022). Tinto (1987) explains that when a student has a sense of belonging, they often feel a bond or

commitment that binds the student to a group or community even when struggles or challenges arise in that group or community.

Conclusion

The student government literature discussed in this chapter brings up many issues that SGOs are facing as well as provides a historical perspective of student self-governance. This chapter also discusses student government literature that connects to student affairs. The next chapter will discuss my proposed intervention based on what I learned from the literature and my personal experience.

Chapter 4: Program Intervention

In this chapter, I introduce my proposed intervention, the Student Government Evaluation. I also provide the purpose and goals of the evaluation and how this intervention connects to my thematic concern of the disconnect between student government organizations (SGOs) and their constituencies. This chapter also includes related professional competencies, how my professional experience has informed this intervention, and the challenges that may be faced in this intervention.

Introduction, Purpose, and Goals

As I stated in Chapter 1, I believe that there is a disconnect between SGOs and the student body that they are there to serve. While the literature does not speak on this disconnect directly, it does show many issues that SGOs are facing that I believe lead to and cause the disconnect (see Chapter 3). These issues include: representation, voter turnout, transparency with the student body, as well as other internal issues. I believe that students who attend a higher education institution that has a good relationship and connection between their SGO and their student body will feel a stronger sense of belonging to their campus community. As mentioned in Chapter 1, sense of belonging is promoted through interactions in the academic, professional, and social spheres of student experience (Parkes, 2014) as well as students' perception that they are being heard, their values are shared, they are represented, and *that they belong* (Tinto, 2015).

To address many of the issues that are addressed in student government literature as well as how it can help connect the student body and the SGO to foster that sense of belonging, I propose a yearly student government evaluation by the students. The mission of the student government evaluation is to provide an opportunity for students to evaluate the elected student leaders on things such as how well they reached their mission, how well they executed their

action plan, how representative they are, and how well they have operated. This will also aid the SGO in fulfilling their democratic duties. The evaluation will provide the student government members and the advisor(s) with the knowledge of what the issues or problems are that are causing a disconnect between the organization and student population so that the student government leaders can work towards finding a solution. The overall goals of the student government evaluation are: to provide student government leaders and their advisor(s) with feedback from the student body, increase the sense of belonging of students in the student body, and increase the knowledge of student government operations. Later in this chapter specific objectives will be outlined as well as how this program addresses each of the goals and objectives.

Student Government Evaluation

The Student Government Evaluation is a yearly evaluation where the student body and the student government members evaluate the SGO. The evaluation has three parts to it: campus-wide evaluation, evaluation focus group, and a self-evaluation completed by the SGO members.

Campus-wide Evaluation

The campus wide evaluation will happen via a survey sent out to all students on campus. This would be sent to their school email addresses and posted virtually in other locations students navigate to (engagement platform, learning platform, etc.). Flyers and tabling across campus could also help get the word out and get participation in the survey. Campuses should not only promote why it is important to participate in the survey, but also provide an incentive to students to participate in efforts to get as many students to participate as possible. This survey will ask a limited number of broad questions about their SGO's performance. The students who participate will also be provided with the SGOs purpose, mission, values (if applicable), and

goals that were set for that year. A list of important sample questions can be found in Appendix B.

Evaluation Focus Group

The evaluation focus group will be a smaller group of students who will evaluate the student government on more specific measures. The students who participate will also be provided with the SGOs mission, values (if applicable), and goals that were set for that year. These students will meet all together with a student affairs staff member (who is not the SGO advisor). They will be asked questions and given prompts and given an opportunity to discuss amongst each other their thoughts about the SGO and their performance. Example questions and prompts can be found in Appendix B.

The size of this group could vary depending on institution size, but I recommend around 15 students. The students participating in the focus group will be selected in a few ways. The first is non-executive board member representatives from select organizations focused on diversity, equity, and inclusion and/or identity-based organizations. Examples could include Black Student Union, the LGBTQ+ organization, and the first-generation student organization. These students should make up at least ⅓ of the students participating in the focus group. The rest of the focus group should be made up of randomly selected students. This group should include students from each class and each major or college (depending on the size of the institution). These students should be contacted via email and given the option if they want to participate or not. These students should each be provided an incentive to participate.

Self-Evaluation

The self-evaluation will be done by all members of the SGO. The members will evaluate themselves and what they personally have gotten out of their participation. This could include

skills gained, leadership or personal outcomes, etc. It should focus on how the organization has helped the members reach these outcomes and gain the skills. The members will also evaluate the SGO as a whole. This part of it should include questions to see if any internal issues, such as bias, mistreatment, and transition issues. This should be given to the SGO members in the form of a survey (see Appendix B for sample questions).

Responses and Action Plan

All responses to the Student Government Evaluation should be anonymous and given to the SGO and advisor(s) to review. The personal self-evaluations done by the student government members should only be viewed by the advisor(s). The advisor may want to recruit other staff or faculty members to help with going through all of the data over the summer break. Based on the results of the evaluations, the advisor(s) should work with the SGO to come up with an action plan for the following year. The evaluations will help them set up their goals which will be part of the evaluation the following year.

Connecting the Intervention to the Thematic Concern

This intervention can address the concern of a disconnect between the SGOs and their constituencies (the student body) in a few ways. The main way that this addresses the concern is that it encourages students to take an active role in holding the SGO accountable, in turn will create a connection between the students and the SGO. The evaluation will provide students with the opportunity to share what they think the SGO should work on, the values and issues they are passionate about, and the struggles or issues they are facing as a student. This will help student government members know what is important to the broader campus community rather than just their close circles and the highly involved or more vocal students.

Another way that it addresses the concern is that it could help with knowledge of what the student government does. The students who participate in the evaluation will be provided with the SGO's purpose, mission, values (if applicable), and goals that were set for that year. This will help the students who participate increase their knowledge of what the student government's purpose is on their campus and what they are working on. These students will have this knowledge that they would be able to discuss with their friends and peers who may not have participated. I think over time that this will help with the overall knowledge growth about student government at that institution. This evaluation also addresses the concern by making advisors aware of any internal issues that may be happening. The internal issues could be leading to students not performing at their best ability and aiding in the disconnect.

Goals & Objectives

Table 4.1 lists the goals and objectives (in *italics*) for this intervention on the left side column. The right size column explains how the intervention addresses the goal or objective.

Table 4. 1

Goals and Objectives of the Intervention

Goal/Objectives	How it is addressed in the intervention
Provide student government leaders and their advisors with feedback from the student body	The student government evaluation in its purpose is to provide feedback to the student government from the student body. The student government leaders and advisor(s) will have access to the results of the evaluation.
Receive feedback from at least 50% of the student body.	The survey that will go out to the entire student body should be promoted across campus. This includes emails, flyers, social media posts, tabling, talked about in classes, etc. There should also be incentives for students to participate in the evaluation.

Student government goals and action plans will be created based on what the student body cares about	The student government leaders and advisor(s) will have access to the results of the evaluation and will be required to come up with an action plan based on the results.
Increase the sense of belonging in the student body	Sense of belonging at a higher education institution is promoted during "interactions with the social, academic, and professional services spheres of a student's experience" (Parkes, 2014, p. 5). If students have more opportunities to interact with the SGO and feel that they have a good relationship with them, that they are listening to them, and sharing their values, that can create a sense of belonging in those students.
Provide the student body the opportunity to give formal feedback to the student government with them knowing their feedback will be used in creation of an action plan for the following year.	It is not just the interaction and communication with the SGOs that will lead to this sense of belonging, the other parts (that they are being heard, their values are shared, they are represented, etc.) foster it. According to Tinto (2015), "it is not engagement per se that drives sense of belonging, as it is students' perceptions of their belonging that derives from their engagement" (p. 8).
Get 50% of the student body involved/engaged in student government efforts	By getting at least 50% of the student body to participate in the evaluation, you are getting a lot more engagement than they typically do. According to prior research, the average voter turnout for student government elections has been found to be about 20% (Smith et al., 2016; Student Voice Index, 2018, as cited in Goodman, 2021b). Therefore, getting 50% of the student body to engage with the student government is an additional 30% of students.
Increase the knowledge of student government, including their purpose and their doings, in members of the student body	In both parts of the evaluation by the student body, students will be provided with the SGO's purpose and mission statement as well as what the student government has worked on (projects, initiatives, programs, etc.) that year. Students will need to read through these to be able to evaluate them.
Through completing the student government evaluation, students in the student	Same as above

body will be able to explain what the purpose of student government on their campus is	
Through completing the student government evaluation, students in the student body will be able to list at least two things that the SGO has done on their campus in the past year	Same as above

Note: This table lists the goals and objectives for the intervention

Theory to Practice

In Chapter 2, I explained that I believe that the purpose of higher education is to pave the path towards employment while also helping students learn to care for others and inspire them to contribute to society. I think that this can be achieved by providing students a robust education both in and out of the classroom. Student government is already set up to provide great educational opportunities to students to help achieve that purpose. However, when SGOs are facing issues, it can cause achieving that purpose much harder. I believe that the student government evaluation will help provide learning and educational opportunities for both the students in the SGO and the students in the student body. These educational opportunities it provides are more democratic and transferable to the world outside of their institution.

In Chapter 2 I also discussed action research as the framework for this thesis. However, action research is a key component to the student government evaluations and is part of the inspiration for it. Action research, specifically participatory action research, is what is happening each year through the evaluations. The evaluation, which will be fleshed out later in this chapter, provides both students in the student body and the SGOs to have a part in the research process, which is important since they are the stakeholders that are affected by the outcomes of the research and action plan. The action plan that the student government creates based on the evaluation fulfills the *action* requirement of action research. As mentioned in Chapter 2, action

research seeks to foster a sense of community through honest interactions as well as being based on localized studies that provide action for specific/local situations (Stringer, 2014). This is exactly what the student government evaluation would be doing on each campus. Stringer (2014) writes that action research "does not resolve all problems but provides a means for people to more clearly understand their situations and to formulate effective solutions to the problems they face" (p. 8). The student government evaluation as an intervention is not intended to fix or resolve all of the problems that the SGOs are facing, but to provide them with the knowledge of what problems they are facing and with help to create plans to address those problems.

Literature

The literature on student government addresses many issues that SGOs are facing as well as provides a historical perspective of student self-governance and their connection to student affairs. The issues that are discussed in the literature include the following themes: purpose and responsibilities of student government, representation of the student body and voter turnout, the student body's lack of knowledge of student government and SGOs transparency, relationships with administration, and internal student government issues. Those internal issues include bias and mistreatment of members, transition, and outcomes from being involved. Chapter 3 also includes literature on sense of belonging and how it could relate to SGO's work. The questions that are asked in the three parts of the evaluation are and should be composed based on the issues found in the literature. Questions included in my list of suggested questions (Appendix B) are framed around the themes of issues stated above. The campus-wide survey and focus group questions and prompts include questions about student's knowledge of student government, student's opinion on if the SGO effectively executed their purpose and/or mission, student's view on if they feel represented by their SGO, and student's perceived sense of belonging to the

campus. The self-evaluation survey given to the members of the student government include questions about their own outcomes from being involved in the organization, about the purpose and mission of the organization, transition, and perceptions of their sense of value in the organization and if they believe any bias and mistreatment are happening within the organization (see Appendix B).

Professional Competencies

There are professional competencies set by student affairs professional associations and organizations that guide the work of practitioners. A handful of these competencies intersect with student government and relate to the Student Government Evaluation I am proposing.

Student government often falls under the umbrella of campus activities. The Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) provides standards for campus activities that are supposed to be upheld. According to CAS (2015), campus activities programming "must be to enhance the overall educational experience of students through development of exposure to, and participation in programs and activities that improve student cooperation and leadership while preparing students to be responsible advocates and citizens" (as cited in Komives, 2019, p. 15). Komives (2019) mentions that student government is one of the areas of student activities that provides opportunities for students to have positive humanitarianism and civic engagement outcomes. The learning experiences available through engagement with student activities, such as student government, has supported the growing emphasis on student college outcomes (Komives, 2019). The Student Government Evaluation is intended to help SGOs uphold their responsibilities which include advocating for the student body, or their constituents. It also will help students hold their SGO accountable and the SGO to

hold themselves accountable, which I believe will help them become better citizens and be able to do similar to their country's government after graduation.

ACPA & NASPA, two student affairs professional associations, have published professional competency areas for student affairs professionals to follow. There are a few outcomes in the leadership competency section that relate to the Student Government Evaluation. The first is: "seek out training and feedback opportunities to enhance one's leader and leadership knowledge and skill" (ACPA & NASPA, 2015, p. 28). The purpose of the Student Government Evaluation is for the student government to get feedback from the student body and improve based on that feedback. The next outcome is: "ensure that decision making processes include the perspective of various groups on campus, particularly those who are underrepresented or marginalized, or who may experience an unintended negative consequence of the proposed change" (ACPA & NASPA, 2015, p. 28). An issue that SGOs often face is with representation of the student body (Goodman et al., 2021; Miller & Nadler, 2006; Naylor et al., 2020; Workman et al., 2020). That issue will guide some of the questions that will be asked in both the campus-wide survey and the focus group discussion. The focus group will also purposely include members of identity-based organizations to make sure that perspectives of underrepresented or marginalized students are included. The final competency is "willingly engage in campus governance in a manner that exemplifies responsible campus citizenry" (ACPA & NASPA, 2015, p. 28). As previously mentioned, the Student Government Evaluation will help students hold their SGO accountable and the SGO to hold themselves accountable, which I believe will help them become better campus citizens.

Related Professional Experience

During this past summer (2021) I had the opportunity to intern in the student affairs office at Moore College of Art and Design, which is a small women's college located in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. This type of higher education institution is very different from the mid-sized public institutions I was used to. Working in the student affairs office, I was able to learn a bit about the SGO that they have at Moore. Since it is a much smaller school, a larger percentage of the students were able to be involved in the SGO, including one member of each student organization. This would not be possible at an institution like West Chester University, where there are just under 300 student organizations.

The smaller institution size also provided the SGO with the opportunity to work on initiatives, such as the food/resource pantry, that would often be provided by a staff operated office at a larger institution. With the small campus size, it is easier for students to have a closer connection with the students who are a part of the SGO. They are more likely to be friends or roommates with someone in the SGO or be a part of a student organization that has a representative as a part of the SGO. This makes it much easier for students to give ideas, feedback, etc. to the student government as well as for the student government members to know what the student body is concerned with and is going through. This led to my desire to explore how we can foster this close community at an institution of a larger size. I believe that providing students a way to give this feedback and creating plans that are informed by the student government evaluation is a way that can help foster the sense of community at an institution of any size.

Challenges

There are a few challenges that I have regarding the implementation or success of the evaluation. The first is that I am unsure if this kind of thing would need to be voted on by the SGO or the student body or if it could just be something the advisor can implement. If it is something that needs to be voted on, it may be a challenge to present this to students and get them to work towards implementation. The second challenge is finding where the incentives will come from can also be a challenge. Will they be provided by the student government themselves, the office that they fall under, or elsewhere? Funding could also be an issue. Another challenge is that student government voter turnout is generally low (Smith et al., 2016; Student Voice Index, 2018, as cited in Goodman, 2021b). If voter turnout is low, it may be difficult to get a high turnout for the survey. I think that providing incentives will help with getting more involvement, but I am unsure of how much that will help increase it.

Conclusion

The Student Government Evaluation is the proposed intervention that I discussed in this chapter. I also discussed how it connects to my thematic concern, professional competencies, and my professional experience in student affairs. The Student Government Evaluation includes the following components: the campus-wide evaluation, the evaluation focus group, and the self-evaluation. Finally, I included some challenges that may be faced when implementing this intervention. In the next chapter, I will go more in depth to implementing the intervention.

Chapter 5: Implementation & Evaluation

In this chapter I first discuss details and suggestions about the implementation of the Student Government Evaluation. Next, I discuss leadership models and styles that inform the Student Government Evaluation. Also presented in this chapter are assessment and evaluation of the Student Government Election as well as the limitations and suggestions for looking ahead. Finally, the end of this chapter looks back on the path of entire thesis.

Implementation

This section consists of details about the implementation of the student government evaluation. Included are the suggested timeline, marketing strategies, and budget and funding.

Timeline

In this section I will summarize the timeline that I recommend for the student government evaluation. A visual representation of the timeline can be found in Appendix A. I will also discuss my reasoning for the timeframes that I chose. This timeline can be adjusted based on current student government processes.

Campus Wide Survey. The first step for the survey that will go out to all of the students at a higher education institution is the creation of the survey. This includes coming up with the questions, setting up the survey in the platform the institution or SGO wishes to use, testing the survey, and securing the incentives. This step should be completed in the last two weeks of March. This makes it so the survey is ready to go out to students the first week of April. Marketing of the survey should also begin right around the same time the survey goes out and continue through the end of the survey. The survey should be due or closed the week before final exams. This gives the SGO about a month or so to promote the survey and get as much student

participation as possible, while also being at the end of the semester. SGOs may want to take advantage of end of the year festivities to promote the survey and remind students about it.

Focus Group. The focus group should happen around the same time as the campus wide evaluation. The last two weeks of March should also be used to create the questions and prompts for the focus group discussions. Doing this at the same time as the survey creation can help know what is being asked in both and how the focus group can go more in depth. The initial student selection for the focus group should be done the last week of March and they should be emailed at the beginning of the first week of April. The students should be confirmed by the second week of April. There may need to be more outreach to students if there is a low response rate or denial of participation from the selected students, so this may need to be adjusted based on the situation. Focus group meetings should happen around the 3rd week of April so it can conclude before final exams and final exam preparation begins.

Self-evaluation Survey. The self-evaluation survey has the exact same timeline as the campus wide survey. The survey should be created during the last two weeks of March and given to the SGO leaders and members the first week of April. This survey should also be due or close the week before final exams.

Post evaluation. After the surveys are complete, the review begins. The SGO advisor and any other staff or faculty that the advisor may recruit to aid them should compile and review the surveys over the summer break. The advisor should be prepared to share the findings with the SGO a week before their retreat or beginning of the year meeting. This should be provided to them via email so they have time to review it on their own and prepare questions and ideas to bring to the retreat or beginning of year meeting. This will aid in the creation of the action plan which should be done during this meeting. The action plan should then be shared with the rest of

the campus within the first two weeks of the fall semester. This provides the student body with the knowledge of what the SGO is doing based on the results of the survey as well as helps hold the SGO accountable to execute the action plan.

Marketing

It is important to have good marketing for an initiative like this to make sure it reaches as many students as possible. This means thinking beyond the student union and where the highly involved students frequent. Making sure the spaces where less campus-involved students are as well as where they might be visiting virtually is important to get representative feedback. The campus-wide survey is the only component that needs marketing, so all of the marketing efforts would be focused on that part of the project.

The survey should go out to all students via email at least twice during the period that it is open. This email could be from the SGO directly, from the officer that oversees the SGO, or from an administrator email such as the president. It could also be beneficial to have the first email come from one of those entities and the second to come from another. The link to the survey should also be sent out in as many campus e-newsletters as possible. This would require reaching out to other departments or offices on campus to ask them to share in their newsletter. It is also a good idea to reach out to the offices and departments to share it on their social media pages. Social media is an important way to share the survey out to students. The SGO should share it out on their social media pages as well as the office that oversees them. Other digital spaces the survey could be shared to increase student awareness is the campus engagement platform as well as the institution's learning platform.

Physical marketing and word of mouth is also important on a college campus to get morse awareness about the survey. Physical marketing could include the campus newspaper as

well as putting flyers in as many campus locations as possible. SGO members could also table in various places on campus asking students to fill out the survey. They could have QR codes on their table for students to scan and get the survey right on their phone. They could also give out quarter sheets to students that have the link and QR code on it with a brief explanation about why it is important for students to complete the survey. This helps get the information out to busy students passing by that do not have time to stop at the table, so they can have the information for later. The last recommendation for marketing is to reach out to faculty members and ask them to mention the survey and why it is important in their classes. This could help reach some students that may have been missed by the other marketing initiatives.

Funding and Budget

The monetary cost of the student government evaluation is minimal, with the only things costing money being marketing materials and incentives. The incentives would be provided to the students who participate in the focus group as well as randomly selected students who participated in the campus wide evaluation. Incentives that work on each campus might be different, but some things that I would suggest are gift cards (for online shopping, local grocery stores, local businesses, etc.), money added onto student e-cards, and items from or vouchers for the campus store. I suggest for the students who participate in the focus group to each be given something of about $10 value. If there are 15 students that participate, then that would be $150 for those incentives. For the campus-wide survey, I suggest an incentive of six chances to win a $25 value item. This would also be $150 for those incentives. Marketing would also be campus dependent based on the amount of flyers needed for campus and the cost of color printing at the campus. I suggest a $35 budget for marketing materials. This brings the total budget to $335.

The funding for these items could come from a few places. The first option is the SGO's budget. This is something they could budget for each year into their organization budget. Another option is that this is a stand-alone budget that comes from student fees. If the SGO manages the student fees, which many do (Goodman, 2021b; Goodman et al., 2021; Laosebikan-Buggs, 2006), they could allocate a portion of them to this initiative. The evaluation could also be funded or partially funded by the office that oversees the SGO or even from an administration budget. The evaluation could help foster things that the administration is working towards (such as a sense of belonging) as well as give them an insight into the student body, so they may want to help fund this initiative.

Leadership Models and Styles that Inform the Student Government Evaluation

In this section I will discuss what leadership models and styles of leadership inform the Student Government Evaluation. These include the social change model and servant leadership. It is important to know what leadership models and styles this initiative relates to so it can aid in the effort when discussing the adoption of it.

Social Change Model

The Student Government Evaluation is informed by the social change model of leadership. The two primary goals of the social change model are "to enhance student learning and development" and "facilitate positive social change" (Astin & Astin, 2019, p. 19). The learning and development is not only focused on students who hold formal leadership positions, but also those who do not but wish to engage and contribute (Astin & Astin, 2019). This is something that was important to me when designing an intervention, having it aid in the development of both the SGO leaders as well as the students in the student body. The second goal of facilitating positive social change, Astin & Astin (2019) go more in depth into by

explaining that it is “to undertake actions which will help the institution/community to function more effectively and humanely” (p. 19). The Student Government Evaluation was created to provide SGOs with feedback from the student body and their own members to create informed action plans so they can function more effectively. By SGOs making informed decisions and having more input from the student body, they are also able to function more humanely.

Servant Leadership

A leadership style that I think SGOs should exhibit and inform the Student Government Evaluation is servant leadership. Servant leadership has three core values: empathy, integrity, and sacrifice. (Martin et al., 2019). These are values that I believe SGOs should have in their leadership. “The practice of empathy has the capacity to help build community and create an environment where members feel supported” (Martin et al., 2019, p. 12). SGOs should be striving to build community among the student body as well as being a part of that community. Increasing the sense of belonging of the student body is one of the goals of this initiative, so this relates to that part of servant leadership. SGO should also value integrity to “create stronger campus community members and stronger citizens following graduation (Martin et al., 2019, p. 12). Valuing integrity and being committed to it will help SGOs understand the impact of their work on the student body (Martin et al., 2019). The Student Government Evaluation will help the students in SGO understand that impact. And lastly, placing “the needs of others before their own” (Martin et al., 2019, p. 12) is important for SGOs to value. They are working for the student body and should be a part of the SGO to work toward bettering the campus community, not just for personal benefit. Having the student body evaluate the SGO and then have the SGO create an action plan based on the evaluation, puts the needs of and feedback from the student body in the forefront of decision making and planning.

Assessment and Evaluation

This section will include how the Student Government Evaluation can be assessed and evaluated. It is important to assess and evaluate programs and initiatives. Assessment and evaluation can help determine if the program or initiative worked as it was intended to. It also can help determine the impact that it had on the campus, organizations, the students, etc. as well as determine the success. The success of the program rests upon if it met the program goals and objectives.

Evaluating the Evaluation

This initiative, itself, is an evaluation. While it is intended to evaluate SGOs, it can also evaluate itself and aid in assessment. The goals and objectives of the Student Government Evaluation inform many of the questions that are included in it. So, year to year, one can look at the responses and results of the Student Government Evaluation to see the impact and success by comparing them. For example, responses to questions involving student's knowledge of their SGO can show if the knowledge has been increasing each year. This can be true with any question that relates to the goals and objectives such as questions about representation, sense of belonging, etc. Looking at the number of students that participated in the Student Government Evaluation can also help determine if the SGO met its objective to receive feedback and increase involvement/engagement with the student body by 50%. Responses and results of the Student Government Evaluation can and should also inform the creation and implementation of it the following year. Other than the inaugural year, students will also be able to evaluate the action plan and the SGO's execution of it through the Student Government Evaluation.

In addition to using the Student Government Evaluation to evaluate itself, there are a few other things that can be looked at to see if it is successful. Seeing if involvement and engagement

in other areas of student government has increased can also help assess if the objective of getting 50% of the student body involved and engaged in student government efforts. These areas include voter turnout for student government elections and attendance at student government meetings and programs or initiatives.

Limitations and Looking Ahead

This intervention attempts to address the issues that have been noticed in my personal experience as well as in the literature, however, it does not provide solutions to these issues. The Student Government Evaluation helps SGOs and their advisors figure out the issues that they are having so that they are able to address the issues they face. This means that the SGOs and the advisors have to come up with or work towards solutions to their issues themselves. More research should be done into each of the groups of issues faced by many SGOs to help recommend solutions.

Conclusion

In this chapter I reviewed the relevant information to successfully implement and evaluate the proposed intervention. Key topics discussed included a proposed timeline for the project, as well as budgeting information and possible limitations and challenges in the future. This chapter bookends the thesis, offering a step towards diminishing the disconnect between SGOs and their constituency. The thesis began with a personal reflection on my own intersection with the thematic concern before reviewing my philosophy of higher education. Chapter Three included a thorough review of the research literature related to student government. The thesis concluded with my proposed intervention, an evaluation of SGOs to identify specific issues that should be resolved to make SGOs work better and meet the needs of their constituency.

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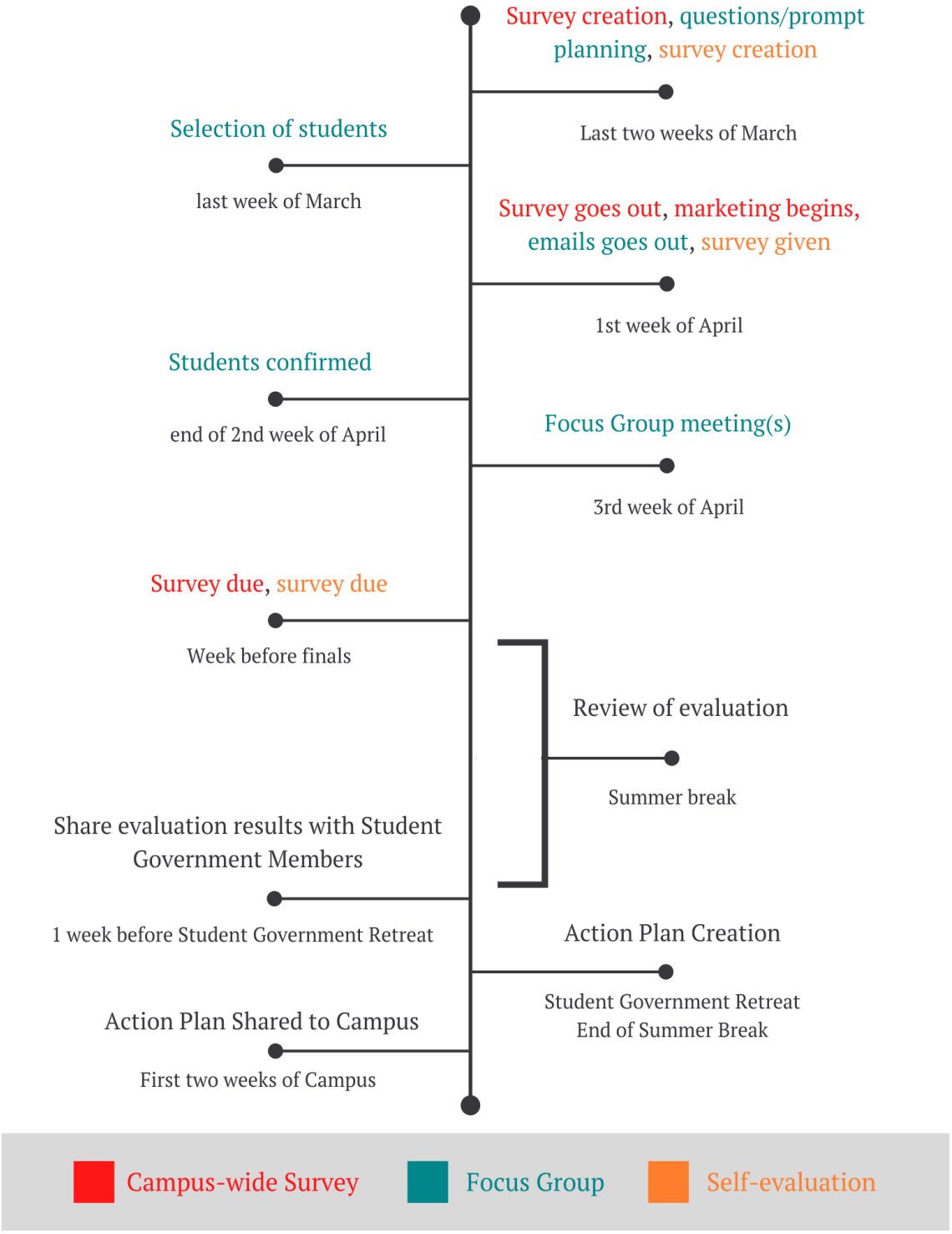
Appendices

Appendix A: Timeline of Evaluation



Appendix B: Sample Questions for the Evaluation

Student Body Survey Questions

- Knowledge (asked before being provided the mission, purpose, activities, etc.)
    - Do you think you could correctly explain the purpose of student government to a peer?
    - Can you name one responsibility of the student government?
    - Do you know who the President and Vice President of student government is?
- Purpose/Mission
    - Do you believe that the student government organization has fulfilled their mission?
    - Do you believe that the student government has fulfilled its purpose?
    - Do you believe that the student government was successful with their action plan? (This question would be included the second year and beyond of this implementation)
- Representation
    - Do you believe that your identities are represented by the student government organization?
- Sense of Belonging
    - Do you feel like the college/university cares about you as an individual?
    - Do you feel like the college/university cares about students as a whole?
    - Do you feel like you belong at the college/university?
- Other

    - Is there anything else you would like the student government or the student government advisor to know? (open ended question)
    - Demographic questions
        - Gender
        - Race/ethnicity
        - Is there any other identity(ies) you hold that you believe inform or influence your answers to the previous questions/thoughts on student government?

Focus Group Questions/Prompts

- Knowledge (asked before being provided the mission, purpose, activities, etc.)
    - What do you believe is the purpose or responsibilities of student government?
    - Do you know who the President and Vice President of student government is?
- Purpose/Mission
    - Do you believe that the student government organization has fulfilled their mission? Why or why not?
    - Do you believe that the student government has fulfilled its purpose? Why or why not?
    - Do you believe that the student government was successful with their action plan? (This question would be included the second year and beyond of this implementation) Why or why not?
- Representation

    - Do you believe that your identities are represented by the student government organization?
    - What identities are missing or lack representation?
- Sense of Belonging
    - Do you feel connected to this campus?
    - Do you feel like the college/university cares about you as an individual or as students as a whole?
    - Do you feel like you belong at the college/university?
    - Does the student government have an impact on any of the previous questions?

Student Government Questions

- About Self
    - Do you feel that you better understand the issues/problems faced by students in the student body?
    - Has your perspective towards the school changed because of your involvement in student government?
    - Has your attitude towards yourself changed? If so, in what ways?
    - Has your attitude towards other students changed? If so, in what ways?
    - Do you consider yourself a better all-around citizen because of your involvement in student government?
- About Organization
    - Do you feel like your voice is valued in the organization?

    - Do you believe that the student government organization has fulfilled their mission?
    - Do you believe that the student government has fulfilled its purpose?
    - Do you believe that the student government was successful with their action plan? (This question would be included on the second year and beyond of this implementation)
    - Do you believe that the student government started this year with the information and tools from the previous year(s) needs to be successful?
- Relationship with advisors and administration
    - Do you feel supported by the student government advisor?
    - Do you feel that the organization is supported by the administration?
    - Do you feel like the administration gets in the way of or deters student government work?
- Other
    - Is there anything else you would like the student government or the student government advisor to know? (open ended question)
    - Demographic questions
        - Gender
        - Race/ethnicity
        - Is there any other identity(ies) you hold that you believe inform or influence your answers to the previous questions/thoughts on student government?