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TWO STUDENT GOVERNMENTS, ONE UNIVERSITY: TRANSFORMATIVE ADVISING FOR STUDENT (RE)ENGAGEMENT AS COVID-19 PERSISTS

Clyde Barnett III, Discover Without Barriers Consulting LLC

This piece is presented from ongoing empirical research exploring barriers to student (re)engagement at a Midwestern university as COVID-19 persists. While college student personnel have worked to restore student life as campus operations have transitioned back in-person, college student engagement has struggled at many institutions across the United States. Taking a qualitative, phenomenological approach–with transformative leadership as a theoretical framework–this study revealed virtual exhaustion, student voice exclusion, and competing priorities as barriers to re-engaging with campus activities. This piece concludes with transformative advising as a possible approach for college student personnel to address these barriers alongside students.

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the higher education landscape (Saul, 2022; Cerullo, 2021). Academic and co-curricular programs deemed nonessential were moved to virtual delivery or canceled (Cerullo, 2021). Further, college students continuously reported exacerbated levels of fatigue working in isolation (Laskowski, 2021). College life today is not what many students dreamt of, and student organization advisors have struggled to re-engage students returning to campus. The institution serving as the site of this preliminary study was not exempt from the frequent transitions required by the pandemic.

Student involvement and campus life dwindled as the university transitioned back to in-person courses. As a small, private, STEM-focus, co-operative (co-op) university located in the Midwest with approximately 2,000 students, student involvement and campus life are critical in creating and sustaining "the pulse of the university," as described by the director of campus life. The purpose of this study is to examine how the student government advisor can re-engage student government leaders who have returned to campus as COVID-19 persists. The director of campus life and the student government advisor were interested in learning the possibilities and barriers related to student involvement from student perspectives and potential implications for advising practice.

The director of campus life and student government advisor sought strategies to reignite students' interest in campus involvement, but such efforts were not solely a result of the pandemic. Before the pandemic, the reputation and perception of student government were already unpopular, and their efforts were called into question by students and faculty alike.

> "What do they *really* do? They're all [members of Greek letter organizations], trying to boost their resumes…been that way since I got here."–3rd year student leader

> "It seems like they really wait for permission to do anything, which is different than what I remember when I started working here over 20 years ago. I hear often that student government is just a prop for the university administration to have their way with little student support or pushback."–Faculty member

Student government's efforts were met with skepticism for years leading up to pandemic lockdown orders. The pandemic expedited their stagnation. It is important to note that this institution has two separate student government organizations due to the co-op makeup of the university. However, both have the same advisor and use the same funding sources, protocols, and operating procedures. As a co-op university, students are separated into two (2) groups–A and B. While Group A spends three (3) months taking courses (and being involved in student government), Group B is working with employers through intentional placements to gain "on-the-job" experience. Then, Groups A and B rotate for another three (3) months (and Group B is involved in student government). This process continues for two cycles, and at the end of the academic year, groups A and B have both spent six months in coursework and six months working. The director and advisor concluded that the organization needed to reimagine its mission, vision, goals, and perhaps its structure, but first, it should consider new advising approaches to assist students in the process. What should the advisor, the director, and the university do differently to support student government leaders? Before sharing the methodology and initial findings from this ongoing research study, a brief overview of relevant student government scholarship and student government advising is presented to contextualize the nature of this work, followed by an overview of transformative leadership (Shields, 2010, 2011, 2017) which serves as the theoretical framework for this investigation.

STUDENT GOVERNMENT ORGANIZATIONS

Student government organizations provide students with unique opportunities for leadership at macro and micro levels, a space to engage and reflect on student-centered concerns within the university, and opportunities for faculty and staff members to work conjunctively with student leaders to establish an environment where community members can thrive (Goodman, 2021b; May, 2010; Miles, 2010, 2011; Miles et al., 2008). Student government organizations serve as the official student voice to the administration and an avenue for certain student services (Hardaway et al., 2021; May, 2010; Miles et al., 2008; Templeton et al., 2018). Student government organizations are typically responsible for dealing with many essential student concerns, including but not limited to student apathy, organizational funding, and student programming and activities (Goodman, 2021a, 2022b; Goodman et al., 2021; Kuh & Lund, 1994; Laosebikan-Buggs, 2006; Miller & Nadler, 2006; Smith et al., 2016; Templeton et al., 2018). Considering the student government organization's challenges and makeup, the student leaders, advisors, and administrators aim to bridge a considerable gap across the campus community.

STUDENT GOVERNMENT ADVISING

Student leader success requires shared participation, ongoing leadership training, and constructive feedback facilitated by skilled and dynamic advisors (Rhatigan & Schuh, 1993). These advisors must fully understand the student populations they serve and demonstrate proficiency in maximizing educational and developmental opportunities for their students (Cross, 1983). Consequently, the student government advisor plays a vital role in student government organizations' success and student government members' leadership development (Kuh, Schuh, & Witt, 1991; McKaig & Polciello, 1987; Rath, 2005). Several characteristics have been documented as successful approaches to advising student government organizations, including experience in extracurricular activities, credentials from student affairs graduate programs, sharing and making available information, accessing campus resources, promoting community engagement, and maintaining facilitative structures conducive to student voice (Boatman, 1988; 1998; Miles & Miller, 1997; Whipple & Murphy, 2004). The role of advisors is demanding and complex (Chaves, 1985).

TRANSFORMATIVE LEADERSHIP

Transformative leadership (Shields, 2010, 2011, 2017) is the theoretical framework undergirding this study. Although eight (8) tenets of transformative leadership exist, only two (moral courage and the de- and re-construction of knowledge frameworks) are leveraged for this study.

Moral courage disrupts notions of correct or incorrect choices and focuses on achieving equitable outcomes for all members of an organization (Shields, 2010). Moral courage requires both realizations through critical

self-reflection (Khalifa et al., 2016; Khalifa, 2018) and subsequently taking action (Shields, 2017). Often, such action must be taken during turbulent times when an organization's members seek a sense of normalcy. But what if challenges persist *because* of normalcy? As mentioned, the student government organization struggled with effectiveness and involvement before the pandemic began. The organization's struggles were only exacerbated by COVID-19 outcomes, making transformative leadership a viable framework for understanding how to lead and advise differently moving forward.

Moral courage and the de- and re-construction of knowledge frameworks are a dynamic duo. Advisors must do the self-work necessary to unpack biases, beliefs, and attitudes that shape knowledge construction, which can create possibilities or barriers to student success (Shields, 2020a; 2020b). Examining dispositions as advisors creates new pathways for shared knowledge construction with students. Student government is frequently cited among student voice and student agency scholarship (Benner et al., 2019) as key to achieving equity-aligned outcomes, particularly when advisors possess a critical lens.

Reconsidering the aforementioned characteristics of student government advisors, how much or how little of those characteristics can be applied to current circumstances? For instance, an active undergraduate experience in extracurricular activities can be helpful, but how does it harden knowledge frameworks? (Sheilds, 2020). The reflexive requirement of transformative leadership keeps advisors questioning, changing, and adapting their advising practice and leadership approach.

METHODS

This study explored the following two research questions: 1) From student perspectives, what are the possibilities and barriers to student government leaders' re-engagement on campus? 2) What are the possible implications for student government advising practice to re-engage student government leaders?

Investigating possibilities and barriers to student government leaders' re-engagement on campus and revealing implications for student government advising practice legitimizes using qualitative design, taking a phenomenological approach as data was collected and analyzed (Dyson & Genishi, 2005; Sokolowski, 2000). Inquiry was driven by exploring student leaders' experiences within institutional structures and culture that influence their participation in student government and any efforts on behalf of campus personnel that might mitigate structures prohibiting their participation. This investigation considered student government leaders' experiences during shelter-in-place orders required by the pandemic and their return to campus as the COVID-19 pandemic persists. This design is also appropriate as the study explores a student government makeup that is peculiar, absent in previous studies, and involves more complicated interactions and experiences that are not easily captured through quantitative analysis.

Data for this study was collected via 29 virtual semi-structured qualitative interviews with student government leaders and two (2) focus group interviews with each student government administration–Group A and Group B (Alshenqeeti, 2014; Hoepfl, 1997; Vaughn et al., 1996). The student government advisor solicited participants. All interviews, individual and focus group, took place virtually via Zoom. Document analysis was also included in the data collection process to examine current policies, practices, and procedures within the organization's "social facts" or constitution, bylaws, and other government documents (Atkinson & Coffey, 1997; Bowen, 2009; Wong et al., 1982).

All interviews were recorded and transcribed to seek and identify common ideas or patterns in the data, resulting in themes and categories to relate the experiences of student government leaders involved at different times (Aronson, 1995; Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Regarding document analysis, the organization's social facts were skimmed, read, and interpreted by finding, selecting, making meaning, and synthesizing information (Bowen, 2009). Document analysis and qualitative interviewing created a pathway for data collected in this study to seek convergence and corroboration, triangulating data and providing credibility (Eisner, 2017).

Finally, regarding data analysis and interpretation, a trusted critical friend with a knowledge base and related experiences acted as professional support and provided ongoing feedback to mitigate bias (Costa & Kallick, 1993). As information was shared with the critical friend, identifying information was omitted to protect participant confidentiality.

FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS

Findings from focus groups indicated students felt exhausted from virtual engagement, excluded from institutional decision-making, and competing priorities between Group A and Group B student government administrations.

Virtual Exhaustion

All interviews emphasized a deep desire to reignite campus life and take action both on campus and within the local community. Stress, exhaustion, and burnout due to the pandemic caused involvement to become "low on students' priority lists." Student leaders felt that "everything is really stressful and overwhelming right now. We're constantly plugged in."

> "I really want to get back involved and make the most of my college experience, I'm just exhausted with how overwhelming and stressful this all is. No one really knows what's going on, and the work keeps piling up. It feels harder to get anything more done right now, so adding student government activities back to my plate is a lot."–Student leader

Increased stress aligns with reports of increased stress among college students, broadly due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Michigan Medicine, Department of Psychiatry, n.d.). Students named contending with "Zoom fatigue" (Steele, 2022) and ongoing uncertainty creating the perfect storm for disengagement. Some courses were in person during the transition back to campus, while others continued on Zoom.

> "Zoom kills my energy–doesn't matter if it's all day or even half a day–it tires me out. It's even harder when some of my classes meet on Zoom, and some are in person on the same day. By the end of the day, I'm drained."–Student leader

Student Voice Exclusion

None of the university's COVID plans included student voices. Due to virtual learning, the university seemed to double down on punitive policies related to academic (dis)honesty as it invested in plagiarism technology that was quickly implemented across academic programs.

> "I logged into class one day, and the professor started going over this new mandatory upload system for our work. All of our work had to be submitted through the system for it to be graded. [The university] doesn't do anything fast, so I wondered how did this happen so quickly? We still use the system now that classes are back in person or like a mixed delivery."–Student leader

> "No one really asked if [students] were okay, you know? It was like, very business as usual, except here's another process to follow."–Student leader

From student leaders' perspectives, the university was less concerned about safety from COVID-19 and more concerned about the university's "academic reputation." Student leaders' voices were unheard, and students conceded that the pandemic placed them at a significant disadvantage in taking action. Their exclusion left students feeling particularly disenfranchised, especially given their roles as leaders of their peers.

Competing Priorities

Finally, being a co-op university with an uncommon academic calendar compounds COVID-19 challenges. Such a calendar composition led to the creation of two separate student government organizations within one. Having dual student government organizations raises many questions regarding student government's impact across campus and the advisor's ability to advise two separate organizations. The dual student government organizations create competing, confusing, and contradictory priorities.

"They [student government group B] don't have to do as much but get all the same benefits and access."–Student government leader, Group A

"Dividing up funds can be hard depending on the time of the year because even the weather matters. More activities happen when the weather is nicer. So, [student government in] fall months do more and get more funding sometimes than [student government in] winter months. This puts one group at a disadvantage, especially if funds go unused. It makes us look like we aren't doing anything when it's cold."–Student government leader, Group B

Along with advising dual student government organizations, this advisor is also responsible for advising community service learning and students involved in sorority/fraternity life who often intersect with student government. There is no additional compensation for these added advising efforts.

"It's not ideal for one person to advise all of these groups. I really have to make sure I'm being fair to everyone, but fairness is not always equitable. [These organizations] need something different all the time, and it's difficult to be consistent even though the university has policies and procedures set in stone."–Student government advisor

IMPLICATIONS FOR ADVISING PRACTICE: TRANSFORMATIVE ADVISING

COVID-19 has revealed and exacerbated countless challenges across the higher education landscape. As colleges and universities have struggled with aspects of campus operations, students have even questioned their ability to complete their degrees (Smalley, 2020). Concurrently, students have always played a pivotal role in social change in higher education through activism and advocacy (Quaye et al., 2022). During this moment in history, higher education institutions could be missing another opportunity to work side-by-side with students to respond collectively. In particular, institutions can rely on and activate their student government(s) as a source of leadership through challenging times. Student government organizations are primed to address challenges directly, representing one pathway to garnering student voice. Given the student government context at this particular institution and the advisor's charge to address virtual exhaustion, student voice exclusion, and competing priorities, there is an opportunity for advisors to lead transformatively. Acting as a transformative advisor (Barnett, 2019) draws from transformative leadership (Sheilds, 2010, 2011, 2017, 2020), proactive advising (Canon, 2013; Varney, 2012), and critical self-reflection (Cooper, 2009; Khalifa, 2018; Khalifa et al., 2016), which are critical skills for advisors and institutional leaders.

Transformative Leadership

Transformative leadership calls for bold strokes through a mandate for deep and equitable change (Montoui & Donnelly, 2018; Shields, 2010, 2011, 2017) and through moral courage to engage in critical self-reflection informing leadership actions (Khalifa et al., 2016; Shields, 2020a, 2020b). At the organizational level, dual student government administrations, not frequently emphasized in student government scholarship, call for the deconstruction and reconstruction of knowledge frameworks to guide the group's efforts toward change (Shields, 2010, 2011, 2017).

Moral courage is required for individual change and to change systems and structures that do not serve community needs (Shields, 2020). The director and advisor were courageous in investing resources to support student government leaders in ways not previously done. Both the director and advisor recognized challenges and thought of ways to change the course of the organization. After lobbying the vice president of student affairs and presenting sobering information on the status of involvement across campus life, including the findings from the focus group interviews, the vice president agreed to fund a leadership development program for all student organizations. The director and advisor needed help and asked for it, which demonstrates the first step in leading transformatively and primes student leaders to do the same.

Attention to advancing equity under transformative leadership and understanding the perspectives and challenges students face is necessary for an advisor's success. Through a proactive advising approach, advisors are accountable to students' voices. Further, a transformative advisor continuously grapples with how their dispositions weigh

heavily on their ability to work with students (Shields, 2017). As advisors engage in transformative leadership development, so should their students, as the practice of promise and critique applies individually and organizationally. Everyone involved in the work had to change for the student government organization to change.

Proactive Advising

Although used within academic advising contexts, proactive advising bodes well for relationship-building between student leaders and advisors. It is essential to be "intrusive without intruding" while being honest about opportunities and challenges (Cannon, 2013, p. 1). The more information an advisor has, the more specific they can be in meeting student needs and cultivating growth and development as leaders. Proactive advisors ask pointed, detailed, and open-ended questions to build connections (Cannon, 2013). According to Varney (2012), proactive advising involves (a) deliberately intervening to enhance student motivation, (b) showing interest and involvement with students, (c) advising in ways designed to increase student success, (d) educating students on options, and (e) approaching students before situations develop. In the student government context, this might mean advisors share student concerns with administrators, especially if students cannot access such spaces. This also means anticipating students' needs, even if students are not explicitly naming them, and identifying areas for growth. For example, advisors can assist students in understanding how identity intersects with student government across race (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002; Hardaway et al., 2021; Mills, 2020), gender (Workman et al., 2020), sexuality (Goodman, 2021b, 2022a), socioeconomic status (Houze, 2021), and more.

Critical Self-Reflection

Finally, self-reflection is critical to achieving transformative advising. Khalifa et al. (2016) present critical self-reflection within the culturally responsive leadership framework. Khalifa et al. (2016) reported on self-reflection as key in a leader's personal growth as it "unearths personal biases, assumptions, and values that stem from personal backgrounds" (p. 1285). Critical self-reflection is transformative (Cooper, 2009; Shields, 2010). This means that the advisor must develop a critical consciousness to advise students through their work and advocate knowledgeably and intentionally on their behalf.

In conjunction with the literature and findings of this study, transformative advising has the potential to be adopted as a critical advising approach for advisors working with student government organizations through complex challenges.

CONCLUSION

As COVID-19 challenges continue, the student government organization has committed to interrogating its purpose for membership and deciding on the type of organization it wants to be. Students have examined organizational impediments and began working towards mitigating them. For instance, the executive board members examined demographic data about their members, including race, class, gender, and income. COVID has required many students to make challenging decisions regarding their collegiate and work lives. Stated plainly, some students cannot afford to be involved on campus. The executive board members learned that students more likely to join either group of the student government organization were more likely to come from high-income backgrounds that did not require them to work while attending college, consistent with prior student government scholarship (e.g., see Houze, 2021).

Incentives, including compensation, have been considered to garner a more critical and accurate student voice for equity-focused leadership. More scholarship is needed in campus activities and practice to account for compositions like the one described in this preliminary study. However, there is limited time for student government advisors to write about their work (Kane, 2019). As mentioned, the advisor in this study has to split time between student government groups A and B, Sorority/Fraternity Life, and community service-learning programs. What should the institution do differently to support advisors and honor (and compensate) them for their time? Still, this research provides a necessary snapshot into how transformative advising can assist advisors in addressing challenges exacerbated by the pandemic and cause scholars to re-examine area student affairs practices that go overlooked.

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