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“So I Just Applied:” Understanding the Journey to Student Government Participation

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this narrative inquiry is to better understand why students in higher education are motivated to get involved in student government. We analyzed the responses of ten current student government leaders at public regional comprehensive institutions in the United States. The analysis is guided by Astin's theory of student involvement and the social change model of leadership development. The study finds that many leaders did not initially plan to engage in student government, emphasizing the impact of past civic involvement, current student engagement, and peer invitations on their subsequent student government participation. Implications call for institutions to deepen their understanding of enrolled students and provide accessible avenues for leadership development.

Keywords: student leader, higher education, student government, social change model

Colleges and universities have been centers for student activism for decades (Rhoads, 2016), and as civil unrest has increased over the last decade, their centrality in civic dialogue has increased (Broadhurst & Velez, 2019; McNaughtan & Brown, 2020; McNaughtan et al., 2018). While much of this student engagement comes from the student body, the role of student government leaders in guiding and serving as the voice for this activism should not be overlooked (Jacoby, 2017). In a comprehensive analysis of more than 70 student government associations, E. Smith et al. (2016) found that while many student leaders engaged in administrative discussions, they

also focused on current national political issues including immigration and educational funding, highlighting the importance of these experiences and leadership roles.

Despite the importance of student leadership on college campuses, there is a history of apathy and disengagement among students in formal leadership positions (Kiesa et al., 2007, Laosebikan-Buggs, 2006). Given the mantra of shared governance espoused by higher education institutions, strong student leadership matching the history of student activism is needed to ensure decisions made by institutional administrators align with student needs and demands (Taylor, 2013). There is a need for a better understanding of what motivates students to seek college leadership roles and what keeps them engaged after being elected or appointed (Lizzio & Wilson, 2009; Lizzio et al., 2011).

The purpose of this study is to present the experiences of student government leaders from public regional comprehensive institutions in the United States (US) focusing on what led to their engagement in an effort to increase understanding for students and administrators alike on how to strengthen these relationships. Using a narrative inquiry approach guided by Astin's theory of student involvement, we analyze the rich narratives of ten student leaders who were serving in an executive leadership role (e.g., president or vice-president) in their student government organization at the time of their interview. We find that many of the student leaders we spoke with did not intend to engage in student leadership, but their past experiences in civic engagement, invitations from peers, and mentoring relationships motivated them to engage initially, then continue their participation.

BACKGROUND

This study is framed using three areas of student government literature. First, we discuss current research on what motivates students to participate in student government. Second, we provide a synthesis of literature focused on the role of student government on college campuses. Finally, we discuss a summary of research on the experiences of student government leaders. These three areas guided our research questions and will be applied in the discussion section of this study.

Motivation for Student Government Participation

Research on student government participation has found that for many students it creates a positive and nurturing experience that enhances their college experience (Bultjens & Robinson, 2011). However, for some students there are barriers to participation (Simmons et al., 2018), with one of the most significant being lack of connection to the issues (Crabtree, 2022; McNaughtan & Brown, 2020). While participating in higher education governance, students are given a unique chance to be a part of college decision-making and develop a better understanding of institutional processes including budgeting, faculty evaluation, capital facilities decisions, and policy development (Lizzio & Wilson, 2009). Engaging in institutional governance can be an incredible experience, but for most students, their motivation is more about personal fulfillment and growth (Lizzio et al., 2011; Workman et al.,

2020). Research in this area highlights four overlapping motivators connected to student engagement with institutional governance. These common motivators include prior civic involvement, a desire for institutional change, a sense of belonging, and personal leadership development.

The first motivator commonly discussed in the literature was prior civic involvement (e.g., Lizzio et al., 2011; Workman et al., 2020). A student is more likely to join student government if they have served in other civic capacities including high school student government or involvement in local government (Toich, 2019). Prior experience helped students better understand how to get involved with student government and how their participation might lead to an impact on their campus (Workman et al., 2020). In addition, Workman et al. (2020) found that for women past experiences with civic involvement helped them push through challenges they experienced in their role. Prior involvement also helped students understand the personal benefits of engagement in student governance in terms of relationships and future opportunities (Albrecht et al., 1994; Toich, 2019).

A second motivator for student participation in governance was a desire for institutional change (Dedicatoria et al., 2023). Changes that students may seek include institutional policy change, development of student support resources, opportunities to increase student activities, and a host of other interests. According to Moore and Ginsburg (2017), some students seek participation in student government as a way to develop their legacy, defined as seeking improvements that will last long after their term finishes. This motivation is connected to a strong desire to contribute to the campus social and academic life (Dedicatoria et al., 2023). For some students, this motivation occurred from seeing significant issues go unaddressed and feeling they had the skills and ideas to engage them (Gibson & Williams, 2019). In short, students desired to create change, or an act of community service, that could benefit the student population and strengthen campus relationships (Miles, 2010).

A third motivator found for joining governance organizations in college was a desire to find a sense of belonging (Cho et al., 2015). Specifically, students expressed a need to connect with peers and connect with others. Past research has found positive relationships between participating in extracurriculars and student satisfaction (Dedicatoria et al., 2023). Typically, these opportunities are the result of invitations from peers (Dedicatoria et al., 2023). This motivator was often tied with making an impact as it created an environment where students can feel they are part of a community working toward a common goal (Dedicatoria et al., 2023). The need to belong and be accepted by peers in any setting creates an intrinsic motivation that leads to searching for groups and organizations that align with personal goals and values (Montelongo, 2002).

Finally, an additional motivator for student government participation, according to the literature, included the rewards and benefits most students hear about during student government recruitment (Cho et al., 2023; Moore & Ginsburg, 2017; Orsini & Sunderman, 2024). Student government has a focus on professionalism and developing skills that most students desire to prepare them for future opportunities (Workman et al., 2020). Student government organizations tend to advertise their organization as a way to enhance skills and gain experience while influencing the student body in a positive way (Dedicatoria et al., 2023). Many students first describe

their reasoning for participating as to bolster and improve their resumes, but retention is achieved as students strive to connect with other and enhance their student community, resulting in a strong commitment to the organization (Cho et al., 2023).

Within the variety of motivators present for students to join student government in higher education, there is an overarching theme of intrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation is one's internal desire, while external motivation is focused on rewards and benefits (Cho et al., 2023). In this review of the literature, there were more intrinsic motivators commonly found among students, supporting Montelongo's (2002) conclusion that individual characteristics and desires have a higher influence on student participation than external motivators.

The Role of Student Government on College Campuses

The role of student government on college campuses extends from the historical context of how students were implemented in higher education institutions' governing boards. Student activism led to allowing space for students in university leadership roles, with the goal of providing a unified voice for the campus (Lozano, 2016). Student government in higher education is thought about as a form of public service with the goal of representing the student population along with improving the welfare of the college community (Goodman, 2022b).

With the history of how student government was formed on college campuses, the modern role of student government still stems from working for the student population's welfare (Komives et al., 2006). The role of student government has also been modified to be a form of communication for students to school administrators, providing an avenue close and amicable relationships with school administration (Alviento, 2018). Having respectable relationships with school administrators allows the student population's issues and concerns to be recognized by the higher education staff so administrators and student government leaders can actively work together to create solutions (T. Smith, 2018).

The student government is a source of protection for college campuses. Student government is charged with the responsibility of creating legislation that will be sustainable and improve the university and its future (Goodman, 2022a; Scott, 2018). The role of student government includes the protection of academic freedom and student success by arguing for broadening access to student benefits and creating more resources to ensure student success (Lozano & Hughes, 2017). Protection of the college campus also includes securing and safeguarding institutional finances, while trying to create more affordability by overlooking student fees (Goodman, 2022a; Scott, 2018).

The main role of student government is to provide a voice for students who are within formal structures to create a platform where issues and problems can be presented, and plans developed to resolve conflict (Lozano, 2016). Student government is an important facet of the overall operation of college campuses because the organization is committed to a public purpose (E. Smith et al., 2016) to represent peers and help the institution effectively fulfill its mission (Scott, 2018).

Experiences of Student Government Leaders

According to the literature, the student government experience is often showcased as a positive one for the organization and the student (Cho et al., 2023; Goodman, 2022b). When a college or university places an emphasis on student government, it has proven to increase enrollment and retention (Miles, 2010). Furthermore, students who participate in student government or other forms of leadership conclude that they develop critical life skills in a low-risk environment like none other (Goodman & Arndt, 2022). Students develop time management and collaboration skills, an increase in self-esteem, and a strong sense of pride for the organization they are representing (Hine, 2013; Miles, 2010).

Research in this area consistently demonstrates that students learn not only more about the skills needed in a professional workplace that aid them in their eventual transition, but they learn more about themselves through different collaborations and challenges. Leadership has proven to be a generative process that is a delicate balance between power and influence (Tillapaugh & Haber-Curran, 2016). This is why students in student leadership never stop developing their skills. Administrators serve as mentors or role models for more experienced students, while these students play the same role for their less experienced peers (Hine, 2013). This ensures that fine-tuned leadership skills are not only practiced and promoted but continually taught as new students pass through.

Despite the clear benefits, not every experience of student government leaders is simple. Not only can the initial election process be flawed through biases (Lee-Johnson et al., 2022; Workman et al., 2020), but the leadership itself can be lacking key components that give the best experience to students (Hine, 2013). Once in the leadership role, students hope to lead and not simply manage, which includes hearing and understanding the voice of their fellow students, but this cannot be accomplished without appropriate representation (Goodman, 2021).

According to the literature, the representation of different races, ethnicities, and genders in student government is not where it should be, but the main focus is on the gender gap (Lee-Johnson et al., 2022; Workman et al., 2020). Men and women have different ways of leading, but this is not to say that one is better than the other. That said, humanity is more comfortable with one gender and does not see the benefit that change could bring (Goodman, 2022a; Tillapaugh & Haber-Curran, 2016). The experience of women in student government has been a greater challenge for this reason.

Even though more women attend college than men, they are less represented in student government and less likely to reach the highest status of leadership within student government, such as president (Workman et al., 2020). This is not to say that it is no longer a positive experience, but women in this study identified challenges and barriers not discussed by their male counterparts (Lee-Johnson et al., 2022). It is still understood that women experience many of the benefits that men do and are more likely to gain a deep-rooted community because of the unique challenges they face (Workman et al., 2020). Even with what someone might deem a negative, the literature counteracts with how students often turn it into a positive. This is what sets

the experience apart and what encourages people to keep participating in student government, despite the potential challenges students might face.

THEORETICAL FRAMING

This study is guided by Haber and Komives (2009) social change model of leadership development. The model stems from student involvement theories created by Astin which focused on the benefits of student involvement to both students and institutions (McNaughtan & Brown, 2020). As the model has evolved, seven “Cs” have emerged as mechanisms within the framework. Wagner (1996) discusses how these seven components can be divided into three distinct areas. In addition to the foundational aspects of the social change model, Harper and Kezar (2021) have called for a critical approach to the model that can better support marginalized groups. They posit that the model in its current form can perpetuate White normative ideals and the use of community cultural wealth could enhance the model (Acevedo & Solorzano, 2023). While this study does not focus on identities, findings do acknowledge diverse experiences. Each area of focus is discussed below.

The first area of focus is on group values. Collaboration, common purpose, and controversy with civility are three Cs associated with group values. The collaborative component alludes to the idea that multiple stakeholders are needed for social change and leadership development (Haber & Komives, 2009). Common purpose extends collaboration by focusing on how those multiple stakeholders must have common goals and values for social change and leadership development to occur. The third component is controversy with civility which posits that collaboration and common purpose will typically result in controversy, which must be handled with respect, trust, and civility. In summary, the model outlines how leadership is not an isolated affair, and collaborative efforts need to be undertaken to advance social change (Buschlen & Dvorak, 2011).

The second area of focus is on individual values. The first C in this area is consciousness of self which highlights how leaders need to be aware of their own beliefs, values, and goals to develop in leadership (Lane & Chapman, 2011). After leaders develop a consciousness of self, they should seek congruence, the second C in this area. Congruence occurs when leaders have consistency in their leadership, acting in a spirit of consistency, authenticity, and integrity (Komives & Wagner, 2016). The final C in the individual values area is commitment, which captures the concept of motivation and fortitude needed to carry out leadership and social change. These individual values all are connected to leaders possessing a strong sense of self, which results in courageous, authentic leadership.

The last area in the model is societal/community values, and there is only one C: citizenship. Citizenship captures the idea that individuals are interconnected to their surrounding community (Wagner, 1996) and highlights how leadership occurs in context and has the ultimate goal of individual, organizational, and societal change. For this study, we applied this model as we analyzed data and identified themes associated with what motivates students to engage in leadership and strive for organizational change. In connection with this model, our study was guided by the following two research questions:

RQ1: What do current student government presidents and vice presidents perceive to have influenced them in their decision to participate in student government?

RQ2: What are the experiences or factors that student government presidents and vice presidents perceive to have impacted their continued engagement and experience in student government?

DATA AND METHODS

Data for this study are from a larger qualitative dataset focused on the experiences of student body presidents and vice presidents at regional public universities in the United States. This subset of data for this study is focused on how student body presidents and vice presidents perceive their motivation for engaging in student government and what has influenced their continued engagement.

The sample was designed with several characteristics and limitations in mind. First, we selected open-access, four-year public higher education institutions that are classified as regional comprehensive. McNaughtan and McNaughtan (2019) found that these institutions are often more student-focused and allow for closer relationships between students and administrators than some larger, more prestigious research-centered universities. Second, we sought a sample that was diverse in terms of cultural context, and while all institutions are regional public institutions, they are located across the United States in diverse political, demographic, and economic environments. Finally, we selected presidents and vice presidents because they have roles that typically work with senior administrators. We felt this would increase the likelihood of mentorship and enhance perspectives on student/administrator relationships. We employed a purposeful sampling approach (Patton, 2014) to select participants for this study. Specifically, we utilized the institutional list from the Alliance for Research on Regional Colleges to form our initial sample. We then randomly selected 50 institutions from that list and identified the student body presidents and vice presidents for each.

To recruit participants, we sent an initial and a follow-up email to our sample of 50 student leaders, which resulted in 11 interviews of which one was removed because they were concurrently serving as a professional staff in student leadership. Each interview was conducted over Zoom, transcribed, and de-identified and all participants were given pseudonyms, selected by request from the participant or randomly by the research team. Table 1 provides a list of participants, their pseudonyms, select demographic characteristics, and institutional information. Given that respondents were already taxed for time, dedicating hours to institutional service beyond their course work, employment, and social obligations, we employed guidance from McClure and McNaughtan (2021), including keeping interviews to under 45 minutes, establishing credibility through shared past student leadership experience, and conducting the interviews virtually.

Table 1: Select Demographic Information

Pseudonym	Race	Sex	Position Title	Years in SG Service	Enrollment	Geographic Location
Ben	Hispanic	Male	President	4	25,000	Southwest
Cole	White	Male	President	2	10,000	West
Deann	White	Female	Vice	3	10,000	West
			President	2		
Ezra	Multi	Male	President		10,000	Midwest
Frank	Black	Male	President	2	5,000	East
			Vice-	4		
Gina	White	Female	President		15,000	Southeast
Hosea	Hispanic	Male	President	2	25,000	Southeast
Ivan	White	Male	President	2	5,000	South
Jeff	Indian	Male	President	3	15,000	Midwest
Kyra	White	Female	President	2	5,000	Midwest

Methodological Approach and Analysis

For this study we applied a narrative inquiry approach, focusing on the stories and experiences of student leaders (E. Smith et al., 2016). As part of our process for utilizing narrative inquiry in this study, we did a cursory review of the literature to identify potential existing themes previously discussed and conducted two initial conversations with past student leaders to develop a set of open-ended interview questions to elicit perspectives on the student leader experience that could be utilized to ascertain narratives and personal stories (Creswell & Poth, 2016). While conducting the interviews guided by the narrative inquiry methodological norms we focused on understanding and interpreting stories shared by participants (Clandinin 2022). We focused on the first five interview questions (out of 17 total). The five questions from the larger project analyzed for this study with their associated Research Question number (e.g., RQ1 or RQ2) are listed below.

1. How did you get involved in student leadership? (RQ1)
2. What are the main reasons you decided to engage in student government? (RQ1)
3. What are some of the barriers to getting involved in student government? (RQ1)
4. Do you have any mentors who encouraged you to participate? (RQ2)
5. How did mentors influence your experience in student government? (RQ2)

DISCUSSION

Prior to conducting the study, we received approval from our Institutional Review Board (IRB). Interviews with participants were analyzed employing Strauss and Corbin's (1998) three-step approach to coding qualitative data: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. During the open coding stages, the data were coded simultaneously using an inductive method that combined descriptive and values-based coding to extrapolate themes connecting the participant's explicit and implicit understanding of FWA to develop preliminary codes. Participant response transcripts continued to be coded until no new codes emerged, thus ensuring saturation had been reached (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The team of researchers then coded the remaining transcripts, and intermittent discussions were held to increase validity. Axial coding was employed to ensure connections across themes and reflect on the alignment between participant's comments and the guiding theoretical framework (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Selective coding led to the most salient quotes used to represent the themes of the study.

Positionality

The three researchers involved in this study have all participated in student leadership experiences as undergraduate students. The lead author served in student leadership for four years with one of those years serving as the student body president for a public regional university. He then pursued a masters and doctorate in higher education. While in graduate school he continued to participate in student government and studies university leadership as a professor at a large public research university. He has also served as an advisor for several student organizations and views student leadership as a positive influence in the lives of students. The second and third researchers are current undergraduate students who have mainly been involved in student organizations.

FINDINGS

In this study, we identify four common experiences related to how students described their path to student leadership. First, the vast majority of those we interviewed had experience with extra-curriculars that led them to student government. Second, students shared that they did not plan on getting involved in student government. These first two themes highlight how many students attend college with plans to engage in athletics, sorority/fraternity life or other extracurricular activities, but most did not see student government as a viable option. Third, their previous engagement experience was typically coupled with a specific invitation from a peer to join student government. Below, we share perspectives on each of these themes from participants.

Pre-College Involvement Experiences

During the student leadership interviews, another common theme that surfaced was that most students had involvement experiences prior to college that prompted them to value engagement. Students reported that prior experiences helped them to see that

their involvement was important and worthwhile. Cole shared his experience of participating in high school band and how that made him feel like he was a part of something bigger than himself. This past involvement gave him a sense of belonging and security that made joining student government less daunting and easier to try. Hosea shared how her childhood experience of helping her parents' campaign for a local election had a lasting impact that led to her wanting to participate in student government in college. She said:

I would go door-knocking with my dad when I was four years old. We were working to get the first Hispanic woman to the [state} legislature. And so that's always kind of stuck with me. I even worked on a campaign when I was in high school, where I got hired.

Deann continually ran for student government in high school, and while she never won an election, she decided to keep trying. She was passionate about creating change, and every year when she ran for election, she gained more experience. Her experience and passion for wanting to be in student government in high school led her to student government in college.

While some students had prior experience in governance organizations, other students had experience in different organizations that prompted them to become involved in student government during college. Jeff shared how he "joined a volunteering organization" and was selected for their board. Similarly, Ivan discussed how he volunteered at a citizen's climate lobby where he served as an area commissioner. Ivan went on to discuss how his local position and volunteerism created a fuller understanding of how government works and a passion for student leadership.

A few students also discussed how they desired a sense of belonging and a higher purpose. Kyra shared her journey of joining student government during college. She was prompted to join because of her desire for a higher purpose outside of class, since she grew up with her mother being in local government. This created a fascination of representation that bled into Kyra. She wanted to be a part of student leadership while attending college. In summary, the role of pre-college involvement fueled a craving for higher purpose, drive, and belonging, which in turn led students to college student government.

Involvement Leads to Student Governance Positions

While interviewing student leaders, one of the most common narratives was that students came to college with a desire to be involved but did not plan on engaging in student governance. However, after getting involved in other organizations, students saw opportunities to make changes or lead by participation in student government. Gina "got a postcard in the mail," Ezra "was gonna play football" and Anna started out working in the "resident's hall association" to cover the cost of housing. All the students' stories did not begin with a desire to be involved but each person found that these opportunities led them to student government involvement. Ben shared his experience, which started with taking a position doing statistics for basketball games while he was an athlete who was not selected for the team. The coach saw his potential

and found him a position as a “student ambassador,” where he could be paid to help with orientation, game management, and recruitment.

In a similar vein, Frank shared how his interest in student leadership was sparked by participation in student activities. He said:

I was a part of the traditions like our freshman orientation, and I wanted to add some ideas for diversity and inclusion. Our homecoming and Commencement weeks were planned by [student leaders] as well. My first official position was on their diversity and inclusion board. I joined the student government, and I was the vice chair of the undergraduate Black Caucus, which was advocating for black students, specifically in policy.

Frank’s experience was work related while others were involvement related. For example, Ezra came to his institution planning to play football but was cut from the team. He took student leadership positions in athletics and the math club, which led him to be selected for a student leadership board that his campus student government oversaw. This experience helped him see student governance as a viable path forward.

While some students had experiences in student involvement that then led them to participate in student governance, other students had planned to get involved in specific student organizations, but when those opportunities did not work out, they jumped right into student governance. Cole shared:

So, there are a lot of reasons why I came to [institution name], and the biggest one was, it is the only university I knew that had a student-run political center. I wanted to come here and do that so badly. During my fresh.

Cole then went on to share how he then started looking at other campus organizations that engaged in political activism and found student government. Similarly, Anna was working in student housing when her position was changed, and she was asked to serve on student committees like student fees, parking, and climate change. That experience connected her with student leaders in student government, and she decided to continue her involvement there. These stories while different in terms of the organizations they served in, highlight the common bridge of involvement generally, to student government specifically.

A few students also discussed how their journey to student government came from their academic experiences. Gina shared a story of being selected for an academic program that focused on “leadership,” which prompted her to seek opportunities to experience leadership and community engagement. In summary, whether students came to college intending to be involved in a specific program or not, by recognizing student governance as a place where they could make change and find leadership opportunities, it became a positive space for them.

The Power of Invitations

The third emerging theme resulting from the student interviews highlighted how almost every one of the student participants shared a common experience of being invited to participate in student government by a peer or administrator. For example, Ezra shared how while working in housing, he had lunch with a friend who “told me

that there were some leadership spots open,” so he went on to apply. Ezra offered a sentiment that was shared by many that his initial view of student government was that it would be a great “resume builder” and support his “professional growth,” but over time he found it fulfilling.

Ben and Cole both shared how it was someone they knew and trusted who encouraged them to join student government, and in both cases, it took multiple invitations. While reflecting on the first conversation Ben shared:

I think that [conversation] help me to see that it would be cool to be on the Student Senate even though I didn't know exactly what it did. . . I had some friends that applied for student government with me, so that helped a lot too.

For Cole, he was getting his student ID when he was asked by a friend to play Candy Land in the student government office. Deann shared that he was approached at an all-freshman event where students were introduced to potential leadership opportunities.

Although the initial invitation was often not the one that led to involvement, persistent friends and having a chance to be involved prior to fully committing shifted their perspective and for these participants, resulted in full participation. Hosea, a student who initially thought college student government was similar to high school where nothing is accomplished, later joined because of his two friends and said:

I'm glad I listened because, you know, I do notice the actual change that our SGA is doing across campus and that the administration is very receptive and listening to our concerns and wanting to change things.

Many students, such as Cole and Ben, noted that when they joined and got involved with student government, they had a perspective shift. They also believe that recruiting students could be easier if they could see or participate in the work that is done.

Ivan posited that if students “just started joining circles of other people who've been very involved in important things” and then start “learning from them,” he felt they would find passion and a desire to be involved. He went on to say that regardless of area or issue, student government is the place where change can happen.

DISCUSSION

This study's findings are in line with existing literature on student government participation which emphasizes the multifaceted motivations and experiences of student leaders (e.g., Buultjens & Robinson, 2011; Dedicatoria et al., 2023; Lizzio et al., 2011). The documented motivations—such as prior civic involvement, a desire for institutional change, a sense of belonging, and personal leadership development—corroborate previous research (Buultjens & Robinson, 2011; Goodman, 2021a; Lizzio et al., 2011) and demonstrate how for many students, engagement leads to more engagement. The prevalence of intrinsic motivators over external ones, as observed in our study, resonates with the emphasis on individual characteristics and personal goal setting as precursors to student involvement (Cho et al., 2023; Montelongo, 2002). Additionally, our findings support the positive impact of student

government participation on leadership development, aligning with literature highlighting the generative nature of leadership experiences (Goodman & Arndt, 2022; Tillapaugh & Haber-Curran, 2016).

Our study was guided by Haber and Komives' (2009) social change model of leadership development, which posits that leadership is a collaborative and values-based process. The findings resonate with the model's three areas: group values, individual values, and societal/community values. For example, we find that for some of the student leaders, their feeling of belonging to the institution through club involvement and engagement enhanced their desire to get involved. In addition, as they individual or group values, they decided to engage with the student government to promote and apply those values.

The individual values of consciousness of self, congruence, and commitment were evident in our participants' reflections on how much of their motivation came from their own goals and future professional pursuits (Lane & Chapman, 2011; Komives & Wagner, 2016). The societal/community value of citizenship was reflected in their interconnectedness to the college community and their aspirations for positive change (Wanger, 1996). These narratives highlight how our story's outcomes can be impacted by connection to organizations that lead to additional opportunities.

In summary, institutions should enhance their understanding of past student engagement experiences to identify potential student leaders or help students see how their past experience can help them participate in college student leadership (Buultjens & Robinson, 2011). This type of information could also help in connecting students with similar values and experiences that could lead to engagement invitations. Recognizing that leadership development and a desire for change are prevalent among students, institutions should provide accessible avenues for aspiring leaders to find mentors and mechanisms for change (Komives & Wagner, 2016). It is crucial to impress upon current student leaders their significance in recruiting and providing opportunities for future leaders, fostering a culture of leadership development within the student body (Broadhurst & Velez, 2019).

Implications

Considering the results of this study, we identify several implications for institutional practice. First, institutions should utilize Haber and Komives' (2009) social change model of leadership development as a tool for engaging future student leaders. Given the alignment between our study and this model, institutions should conduct student interest and experience surveys with an emphasis on understanding past leadership engagement and desired future experiences. These data could help institutional staff better recruit and engage potential student leaders (Buschlen & Dvorak, 2011). Similarly, students should be pushed to know and understand the values of their organizations. For many of the students in this study, their first organizational values were connected to student government, or they felt the need to promote their organizational values and so they joined.

In addition to recruiting, institutions should maintain avenues for students with leadership aspirations to readily access mentors and mechanisms for change

(Crabtree, 2022). Given that the participants in this study shared a common desire for leadership development and institutional change, these opportunities should be developed by institutional leaders and easily accessible to students. As part of this implication, current student leaders have an obligation to share their initiatives with campus and promote greater student involvement in critical issues. Invitations were critical to engagement and as was evident in the narratives of these participants, the path to student government was incredibly diverse. None of our students discussed finding student leadership on their own; they were all invited. Institutions, staff, and current student leaders should focus on individualized invitations. This work will require greater awareness and engagement with their campus but given the significant potential for increased engagement from students, these intentional efforts are needed.

Finally, our findings highlight the role of pre-college experience and identity as a leader playing a critical role in attaining executive leadership positions. Some participants even discussed losing elections but maintaining a desire to be involved due to their support from mentors or friends and their identity as a leader in their past engagement experiences. The social change model for leadership can be a catalyst for developing leaders, but more importantly helping students to identify as leaders.

Directions for Future Inquiry

In addition to several implications for higher education practice, this study resulted in three distinct directions for future research. First, given the finding that administrators' invitations can help increase involvement, future research should further dissect the relationship between administrators and student leaders. Understanding the relationship between student leaders and administrators could shed light on power dynamics and potential collaborations around institutional goals (McNaughtan et al., 2021). Studies in this vein could focus on how student leaders view administrators and provide insight into how administrators can better engage with students.

Second, future investigations should strive to understand how student identity impacts student leader experiences. In this study, a diverse set of student leaders were interviewed, and while we did not identify significant differences in why students got involved in student leadership based on student salient identities, there were comments made on how they felt the need to represent diverse voices on their campus. This highlight of diversity may be more influential when examining how it impacts their leadership specifically (Workman et al., 2020).

Finally, a longitudinal analysis of student involvement motivations, considering life experiences, would provide insights into the evolving nature of student engagement throughout their academic journey (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Similar to past studies on student development that tracked students from college entry through graduation, a study that focused exclusively on student leaders could provide insight into the impact of student leadership experiences on the student's life and provide insight into the diverse pathways to student leadership.

CONCLUSION

Our study contributes valuable insights into the motivations and experiences of student government leaders, emphasizing the need for collaborative actions between institutions and student leaders to foster a culture of engagement, leadership development, and positive institutional change. The results of the study highlight that all engagement experiences, before and during college, can be jumping points into student governance. As administrators seek to promote civic engagement, their knowledge of their students and work to promote shared governance has the potential to enhance the student experience (McNaughtan & Brown, 2020).

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