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The Loudest Voices in the Room: Understanding Student Government Advocacy During a Tense

Political Climate

Organizational Communication Capstone Project

University of Portland

Fall 2018

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Abstract

The university campus is often highlighted as an important location for individuals to freely engage in political discourse. Recently, university students across the nation have taken initiative to host protests to demand institutional reform on issues such as campus safety protocols, LGBTQ rights, and Title IX policies. As a result, a divide is created between the student body and the university administration. This qualitative study uses ethnographic methods to understand the role of university student government as a political entity meant to advocate for student demands, while working with the administration that is often considered the source of political tensions. The organizational culture theory is used as a framework to understand how cultural values are reinforced through specific behaviors and rhetorical devices. This study found that the complexity of advocacy was discovered through competing motivators and the strife that comes with seeking collaboration. Additionally, political rhetorical tools including dissociation and abstract language reinforce the values of the culture by creating an “us vs. them” narrative.

Keywords: advocacy, student government, university protest, dissociation, organizational culture

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The Loudest Voices in the Room:

Understanding Student Government Advocacy During a Tense Political Climate

What does it look like to have the agency for change? Within the past 10 years, university students continue to protest, petition and strike to demand both university and federal policy amendments. This leads to the question, is radical change initiated by student demands, administrative agendas or federal government entities? From gun safety protocols, to LGBTQ rights, to Title IX reform, university students across the country are uniting to change and define their campus culture. The conversation surrounding gun control is increasingly relevant on college campuses. Since the Parkland shooting in February 2018, there have been several fatal shootings on university campuses, including Savannah State University in February 2018 and Central Michigan University in March 2018 (Kennelly, 2018). TIME Magazine reported on the “ripple effect” of student protests across the nation after the Parkland, Florida shooting, and collegiate responses to such protests (Ducharme, 2018). Many colleges reported to its prospective students that peaceful, gun control protests are welcome on campuses, and will not affect admission into the universities (Ducharme, 2018). Reuters reported a story with a similar narrative, stating that a variety of universities made public service announcements to declare that students will not be punished for participating in political protests (Cherelus, 2018). This rise in political expression brings to light the role of student government. As a political entity, university student governments operate as a voice for students, yet remain under the umbrella of the university administration. Currently, there is minimal research surrounding the purpose and influence of student government during times of political unrest. By using the organizational culture theory as a lens, this study seeks to understand how a university student government advocates for student needs while working with the university administration that may be the

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source of political tensions. Additionally, this study will seek to understand the role of political rhetoric to reinforce cultural values within the student government.

Theoretical Framework

The core theoretical framework used to guide this study is the organizational culture theory, which frames an organizational culture as one that is comprised of shared assumptions, values and beliefs that ultimately govern the behaviors of its various members. This can include social and cultural norms, including how members dress, act and perform responsibilities. This theory will be used as a lens to analyze interactions, social formalities and artifacts. This theory will also be used to frame how the student government organization values may come in conflict with administrative or student values. Additionally, the organizational culture theory will be applied to certain political rhetoric tools to analyze the influence of such rhetoric on reinforcing cultural values. By using this theory to analyze a particular university student government, this study will outline the various ways in which a political entity carries out social and cultural norms through specific traditional and non-traditional practices. As elected members, representatives work to serve their constituents who make up the student body, and, as a whole, represent a variety of cultures, as well as diverse thought and opinion. This study will seek to understand how the student government seeks adequate representation through advocacy. As a result, this theory will be an adequate framework to best understand how a singular entity represents a variety of cultural values and the values of the university it operates under.

Literature Review

Cultural implications of student protests

Kennelly, Johnston, Gray and Chaudhuri study the cultural implications of student protests on university campuses, and seek to understand how these implications are reflective of greater political tensions between students and governing bodies. To begin, Gray highlights the unique spread of shared messages to empower individuals to take actively voice political opinions (Gray, 2018). This spread is distinguished as a cultural phenomenon that began from grassroots efforts and spread through corporate messaging. Social media acts as a significant mediator for this unique spread of political agenda (Gray, 2018). Furthermore, Johnston outlines the transformative nature of student protests throughout the years, and how modern protests are rooted in demands that seek fundamental, institutional changes. (Johnston, 2015). “The origins of today's student complaints are deep and in many cases intractable, and the more accustomed activists become to protesting, the more readily they will mobilize in response to new provocations” (Johnston 2015, p. 2). As students become more aware of institutional agendas, the more ambitious they become in changing those agendas (Johnston, 2015). One example of this concept appears in the Quebec student protests of 2012. Over 200,000 students across the province engaged in a two-day strike that resulted in the tabling of *Bill 78*, a bill that re-introduced university tuition fees, and resulted in severe police response to student protests. Kennelly breaks down the factors that contributed to social-movement organizing, and attributes the success of the protests to a strong presence of “organizing culture” in Quebec (Kennelly, 2014). Kennelly writes that the students were successful because they linked their arguments to larger causes, thus forming a unique organizing culture (Kennelly, 2014). “The students were consistent in arguing that the strike was not only about tuition fees, but also about protecting

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young people's inherent right to education, and about resisting the incursions of corporate capitalist interests into higher education" (Kennelly, 2014, p. 138). Chaudhuri's 2016 study outlined the cultural implications of a student government uprising in Jawaharlal Nehru University after student union president Kanhaiya Kumar was arrested on the basis of sedition, which caused an uproar through student protests and strikes (Chaudhuri, 2016, p. 339). The study presented by Chaudhuri outlines key cultural influences relevant in India during the time of political unrest. As a result, Chaudhuri summarized that student protests arose out of political tensions between conflicting organizational forces and cultural values. Chaudhuri writes:

Student politics in India at that moment seemed to be ushering in change from postcolonial perspectives along with radical transformations of the political landscape among the youth. This changed possibility seemed to go beyond local preoccupations, gesturing toward the contemporary currency of postcolonial politics expressed in the simple, material form of a song of protest militating against problems, both historical and contemporary, that needed to be articulated and voiced" (p. 347).

What began with an initial spark of possibility turned into a full political uproar as students united to demand institutional reform.

Role of student government in facilitating a space for self-actualization

Miles' study and Loader, Vromen, Xenos, Steel and Burgum' study assert that the role of a student union is one that facilitates a space for the well-rounded student citizen, especially in developing the political-self. Miles addresses the challenges and responsibilities of student government associations. According to Miles, "student governments must follow their responsibilities as outlined in the student government's constitution and by the institution. . . and must follow responsibilities delegated to them by the leadership of their institutions" (Miles,

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2001, p. 325). Miles stresses that student government become complacent when they are not fully informed on institutional politics, and are not acting as present forces on the campus (p. 325). Miles found that student government members reported positive relationships with their direct advisors, and valued the freedom to make decisions (p. 326). Loader et. al define 'student societies' as ones that "provide the resources necessary for mobilizing students and sustaining their interests as well as enabling the development of organizational skills necessary for a future lifetime of civic engagement" (Loader et.al., 2014, p. 821). By analyzing digitally mediated student groups in three countries, United Kingdom, Australia, and the United States, this study asserts that "the student society can be seen to represent a transitional space for the student between adolescence and their prospective occupational fields" (p. 824). Loader et. al. reported that having a sense of autonomy as a student that resonated with a particular political party was necessary in generating self-actualization, yet may also hinder the relationships with students with other political views:

The very strength of student groups to provide a protective milieu for the development of a dutiful political habitus suited to the political field of conventional politics may also act as a powerful mechanism to isolate them from the lived experience and views of other citizens" (p. 830).

This study also reported social media as a valuable platform for political engagement for students. However, "the very ease of access and the potential rapid and widespread 'viral' dissemination of content led to expressions of concern that social media could amplify misinformation" (p. 833). Additionally, the "practices of organizing, sharing information and social networking of the student societies were all significantly mediated by social media technologies" (p. 836). This study asserts that student unions offer an umbrella for a variety of

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student societies that generate and participate in political practices, promoted by “political talk, values, emotions and performances” (p. 836).

Student opinions on concealed firearm policies on university campuses

Schildkraut, Carr, and Terranova’s study, and Hemenway, Azrael, and Miller’s study assess university student opinions in regards to permitting concealed handgun licenses to carry on campus. In a 2001 national study conducted by Hemenway et. al, 94% of individuals do not believe guns should be allowed on college campuses (Hemenway, 2001). This study summarized that most Americans believe they would feel less safe as more people in their community. Considering this study took place over a decade ago, it’s important to highlight recent studies that reflect the shift in opinion with the rise in mass shootings in the United States. In order to improve campus safety after a fatal shooting at Virginia Tech, several states made efforts to proposal concealed handgun licenses to carry firearms on university campuses. Those who approved such proposals argued that concealed firearms among university members “enables those individuals to protect themselves and others” (Schildkraut et. al., 2018, p. 488). Those who disapproved of the proposals argued that the “policies are counterproductive to the overall academic purpose of collegiate learning. . . From the standpoint of academic freedom, the belief exists that the free exchange of ideas. . . could be hampered by the presence of a firearm” (p. 489). Among these concerns include the practical considerations that regard high-pressure incidents, in which a law enforcement office may mistake an individual for the gunman, in which more lives are put in danger (p. 489). Additionally, Schildkraut et. al. found that a “concern also has been raised as to whether students are mature enough to handle the stressors of college life and whether failure to do so could result in increased firearm violence on campus” (p. 489). Schildkraut et. al. found that nearly 48% of individuals expressed opposition to the concealed

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carry policy on campuses. Notably, this is a lower reporting than previous research has reported, which may be a result of the “general political climate of the state, which emphasizes more gun control over less, such as the right to carry” (p. 497). In other words, the political views of the student campus often align with the political climate of the state.

Student government practices in connection with federal government legislation

In a 2016 study conducted by J. Ben Shepard, Shepard compares student government practices with First Amendment analysis through federal court cases of student government campaign violations (Shepard, 2016). Shepard argues that intermediate scrutiny of these practices is necessary for guidance of these cases. “As a general matter, student governments act under the color of state law when they adopt rules and regulations governing the election of their officers” (Shepard, 2016, p. 563). Shepard continues to outline a flaw with this system, by stating that although the student government operates with a sense of autonomy, the state and college exercised control over the governing body (p. 563). Shepard argues student government officers are largely considered state actors due to the various circumstances of their being. This is reinforced by student government fees, student government spending, and meeting times that align with the college and student activities in mutually beneficial relationship (p. 563). Shepard’s study can be best understood when university student governments identify as the party of their respective state. Shepard argues that this leads to a discrepancy in the way federal courts handle cases of free speech in student government. In some cases, federal courts defer to free speech as a matter of the University’s educational system, and the properties of the university to be purely an educational experience for students (p. 578).

Conclusion

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The literature presented encompasses a variety of student government traits across a number of demographics. This literature summarizes that the university student government serves several purposes, and of those include a space for politicization, self-actualization, culture-sharing and culture-shaping. However, there is little to be found about the role student government in mediating a combative political climate, and the role of such government to be a liaison and advocate for student demands.

Research Questions

R1: How does a university student government advocate for student demands while working in conjunction with university administration, specifically during a tense political climate?

R2: How do members of student government use political rhetoric as a tool to create and reinforce the organizational culture?

Methodology

Field research was performed over the course of ten weeks at the student union building of a large public university. Located in a liberal city within the Pacific Northwest, this university is a commuter school on the outskirts of a downtown city. This site was chosen due to recently heightened political conflict on campus, and the resulting coverage of the university in local news. Field observations, semi-formal interviews, and artifact studies were the primary methods for a holistic ethnographic approach. There are two demographics of subjects for this study: the members of the university student government and university staff who work with or alongside the student government. The subjects ranged from 18 to 40 years old, male and female. All interview participants were recruited via email and were informed of the project prior to any observations. Participants were chosen based on their involvement and direct relationship with student government. This study consisted of five semi-structured interviews that ranged from 30

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to 40 minutes in length. Interviews were conducted with a set of questions to guide conversation and different sets of questions were asked based on the demographic of the participant. For example, questions for the student government participants were oriented towards their involvement in student government, their relationship with university administration and the student body, and how the organization is responding to the political climate. Questions for the staff members were geared towards their relationship with student government and the university administration and their perception of student government. Interviews were audio recorded for transcript purposes, and all data is password protected with access given to the researcher and the researcher's advisor. Interview participants signed a consent form and were given all relevant contact information. 14 members of student government and one student advisor were observed during meetings and interactions with constituents. Observations were recorded with detailed field notes. The researcher's intentions were prefaced before observations began. Seventeen artifacts were researched, including five public flyers, three senate meeting minutes, three public news articles, two public websites and four public social media posts. The total data collected came to 35 pages. Data was analyzed through hand-coding specific themes, and a code book was kept to organize the themes. Coded data was made available only to the research and the researcher's advisor.

Findings

Despite the overcast skies and sporadic rains that come with fall in the Pacific Northwest, hundreds of people move across the PNU campus. Cyclists and pedestrians travel up and down the busy roads. As a large, public university located in a downtown city, Pacific Northwest University primarily functions as a commuter college and is a lively place for students to engage with the city and the university. The Williams Memorial Student Union building is located along

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the outskirts of campus, and is the hub for a variety of student activities, clubs, and student groups. While the campus is bustling with activity, stepping into the building provides an overwhelming moment of silence. The lobby is a wide, open space with a mezzanine that overlooks the entrance. People leisurely walk in and out of the various offices, with a low murmur of voices from the halls and the distant whirl of a coffee machine from a coffee shop on the main floor. Down one corridor is the main office for the Associated Students of Pacific Northwest University. The ASPNU office is hidden behind the athletics box office and consists of a main space with a long, central table and a separate conference room. The bright green accent walls and a wave of warm air are immediately noticeable. Desktop computers line the walls, and large windows on the far wall reveal the incoming rain. It's 3:45pm on a Friday afternoon, and the weekly ASPNU Executive Board meeting is soon to begin. Students gather around the main conference table which is quickly cluttered with the accumulation of laptops, phones, notebooks, food and drinks. The student body president sits silently and the far end of the table, and the vice president sits at the opposite end on a computer. Students, bundled in sweaters and hats, engage in quick chatter with one another. They speak at a relatively high volume, while other students, seemingly unrelated to the meeting, are working at the desktop computer. As a few more members hustle into the room they greet each other with enthusiasm. The clock hits 4:03pm, and the president calls the meeting to order.

Representational advocacy and the door to institutional change

While the immediate goals of ASPNU change depending on the elected and hired leadership boards, the purpose remains the same: ASPNU operates as an organization that represents the greater student body, and is a platform to facilitate student voices. This mission is made clear in executive board meetings when representatives made explicit claims from their

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constituents and passionate assertions about certain policies and administrators. In order to effectively advocate for student needs, ASPNU has made strides to solidify fundamental bureaucratic procedures to ensure that the organization functions like a legitimate government institution. Senate agendas and meetings adhere to the requirements of the state's public meeting law. Leadership development and transparent communication between committees are considered priorities for successful collaboration. Senate members regularly meet with the university's board of trustees. According to Carlos, a member of the ASPNU Executive Board, solidifying these procedures has increased student body awareness of ASPNU and, in turn, allowed for increased recognition:

[Students] actually see [ASPNU] as a legitimate organization when they see student government representatives at board of trustee's meetings. They are taken more seriously, and [ASPNU representatives] are actually there to give input and their input is taken into consideration. Students feel more confident in engaging with us and actually ask us to do something for them.

Carlos wears a small PSU pin on his shirt. Though a soft-spoken individual, he is a strong believer in the potential of ASPNU. He often begins his statements by saying "I believe. . ." He believes that gaining students' trust ultimately allows for ASPNU to uphold greater agency in their efforts to be advocates.

A few ASPNU members recalled the time they initiated a strike when the board of trustees voted to pass a tuition increase. Through coordinating a press campaign, public forums and a student strike, ASPNU generated passionate student support against the raise. According to one ASPNU member, the tuition freeze campaign was spearheaded by ASPNU, but they believe ASPNU provided students with the platform to assert their

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beliefs. They revealed that this strike created a strong tension between student government and the PNU administration, in which the administration was “not happy” with the resistive efforts, and asked ASPNU to call off the strike. The strike resulted in a delayed vote and, ultimately, a reduced tuition increase. In a public statement, the PNU President reported that they understand the concerns presented by students, and plans to seek alternative sources of funding.

Despite representation of student government at an administrative level, ASPNU currently pursue a liberal approach to political reform. As a result, conservative voices on campus are considered the minority. According to Michael, a member of PNU Student Affairs, minority voices don't contact ASPNU, or perceive ASPNU as representative of their values. Michael expressed a deep appreciate for the ASPNU executive boards that encourage political debate. On the other hand, Kelly, a student advisor at PNU, believes this year's ASPNU board has made good steps to becoming a facilitative platform for constructive dialogue. Carlos agrees, asserting that a change of leadership and a collaborative mindset has allowed for disagreement and autonomy within the organization. This autonomy, Carlos says, allows the government to take ownership over their voice, rather than administration leaving them in the dust.

However, this autonomy does not always prove beneficial. Some students view student government as representatives of the values held by the PNU institution. Kelly stated that ASPNU has been the subject of criticism by the student body when faced with the challenge of being advocates for all:

On one front they are advocating for students, and they are having to work within the system that is the university. And so, sometimes that can, depending on what's

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going on, put them in the good graces of students and sometimes it can put them in the bad graces of students, where they're like, 'You're working with the administration and so you're not for us.' It's always a battle.

The walls of Kelly's office are covered in a plethora of ASPNU flyers and several letters from students. When the interview topic changed to ASPNU's relationship with administration, her tone became slightly frustrated. As an advisor, she seeks to better the advocacy process, but feels she is often viewed inaccurately when students label her as "the administration."

The administration on the other side of the door

According to members of ASPNU, the term "administration" is synonymous with a PNU entity of people that are considered the policy-makers. In meetings, ASPNU members often speak of the administration with a negative connotation. Just across the hall from the ASPNU office is the PNU Student Activities office. Becca, a staff member in PNU Student Activities and former ASPNU representative, has an unapologetic personality and is an advocate for free speech on the campus. She described ASPNU's relationship with administration as one that is established on the basis of trust:

The people who you're familiar with and you trust – they don't become 'the administration' anymore. So it's all the people on the other side of the line that you don't know personally, or you know and you don't trust them. The administration becomes the code word for the untrusted nebulous thing.

However, as an advisor, Kelly expressed that this trust-barrier is a challenge throughout her role. She described how she mitigates strong-willed activism from students:

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I'm trying to help students understand that there's merit in beating down the door and saying 'We want these things!' But there's also merit in opening the door and saying 'Can we work on these things together?' At the end of the day, the people that are making the decisions are the people you got to win over. Some people see that as like, 'Oh, I'm not going to suck up to the administration because then I'm going to be a pawn of theirs.'

The strained relationship between ASPNU and the administration is one that is both a challenge and an opportunity in the eyes of ASPNU, and integral to their identity as an organization. One member of ASPNU believes that the values held by the PNU administration are inherently corrupt, and feels that, despite maintaining a respectful relationship, the missions of ASPNU and PNU administration are at odds. Consequently, they stated that they carry around a hefty binder of administrative policies at all times, in case fact-checking becomes necessary. As a student representative, they feel privileged to have relationships with the administration, and views these relationships as opportunities that not every student has. Comparatively, Carlos asserts that "a collaborative mindset," while an improvement from previous years of ASPNU Executive Boards, has not always lead to the outcome ASPNU hoped to achieve:

I came out with a collaborative mindset, like, 'We're going to work together,' but there have been instances where the administration is not so willing. So then I have to change my methods and say: 'We tried to collaborate with you and you're not responding to it.' So we have to change our tactics. And that [has been] difficult for me to manage.

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Beyond the tuition campaign, ASPNU continues to be the voice for students to seek improvements for policies regarding homelessness, food insecurity, and campus safety. Yet, challenges lie ahead.

Knocking down the door to institutional change

In 2015, PNU began the arming of campus police. Three years later, a civilian was fatally shot by the campus police. Since the incident, the officers have returned to the work force.

Today, the windows of the ASPNU office are covered with large posters with the phrase ‘Disarm PNU.’ The hashtag #DisarmPNU is bolded on flyers and posters that clutter the various desks in the office. Representatives wear pins and patches with the phrase engraved. The ASPNU bulletin boards, which would otherwise contain meeting agendas and upcoming events, are pinned with Disarm PNU posters and explicit calls to action. After the incident, hundreds of people gathered in the city for multiple public demonstrations to demand campus safety reform. #DisarmPNU quickly spread across social media, with posts demanding justice for the victim. Many labeled this campaign as a “fight to disarm.” Photos from the protests reveal posters that contain phrases such as, “Mourn the dead, fight for the living,” “No more killer cops,” and “There is blood on your hands.” While the PNU institution undergoes inspection from an outside consulting firm, ASPNU continues to strive for policy reform, backed by an outraged city and student body. After the incident, the ASPNU senate gathered for a special meeting. The minutes reported that a number of ASPNU members discussed initial steps to take, including ASPNU lead campaigns, data collecting, committee formation, reviewing PNU history, investigating proper training for policeman, and comparing city police and campus police jurisdiction. Another member declared that having ASPNU officers at administrative meetings was not enough. Notably, one member spoke up against the popular opinion, saying that unarmed campus police

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would leave them feeling unsafe on campus, and asked the group to be wary of unexpected outcomes. Carlos spoke to this newfound mission of ASPNU:

We will focus on campus safety in a way where we're critiquing the way administration has made decisions for the university. One of the reasons they decided to arm campus public safety was because they believed that it will protect citizens from an active shooter or the campus will be more safe. But from my own research and student government's research is PNU wasn't prepared before the armed campus the shooter, for example they're not prepared today either. So that brings into question the legitimacy of the decision process the university takes.

After creating a petition signed by 6,000 individuals, ASPNU passed a resolution to disarm campus police. Although the university is not required to adopt such resolutions, they ultimately serve to represent the explicit political demands of ASPNU. As conversations surrounding student welfare continue, staff and students alike seek avenues to improve the overall PNU student experience. Michael spoke to the influences behind changing student life on campus:

We know this is where students are coming in their free time to try and get engaged, and that's important. It's also important for future students to understand that the university has committed resources to student engagement and involvement beyond the classroom. . . And again it's not a one-person thing. It's not one person that is going to make this. This has to be a collective decision that the institution makes about committing to life beyond the classroom and what that looks like.

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Today, the Disarm PNU movement does not go unnoticed by people who pass through the campus. The messages serve as a stark reminder of a campus divided, and ASPNU has no intention of removing the posters anytime soon.

Discussion

The first question guiding this research is, “How does a university student government advocate for student needs while working in conjunction with university administration, specifically during a tense political climate?” By using the organizational culture theory to define the ASPNU culture, the complexity of advocacy was outlined through competing motivators and the strife that comes with seeking collaboration. The second question narrowed the focus to understand the influence of political rhetoric within the culture by asking, “How do members of student government use political rhetoric as a tool to create and reinforce the organizational culture?” Dissociation and abstract language were highlighted as a key rhetorical devices to used to reinforce cultural values.

Dissociation of “the administration”

ASPNU uses a variety of terms to justify their actions and ultimately reinforce their organizational beliefs. As demonstrated in the findings, the term “the administration” is a common phrase used to distinguish the people on the other side of the door: those who are the administrative policy-makers. When used by ASPNU representatives in conversation with constituents and in executive board meetings, the dissociation created by the phrase implies a divide between all those who are “the administration” and all who are not. Those who fall under “the administration” include the policy-makers who do not resonate with the beliefs of the students. Those who are not “the administration” are the people who ASPNU members trust as allies in the advocacy process, including students and staff members. The dissociation is a

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powerful rhetorical tool to reinforce the values within a culture of people: the “us” against “them.” Consequently, “the administration” is a blanket term that can be perceived differently based on the audience and their beliefs. As seen in this study, the abstract language has both lead representatives and staff members to be caught in a limbo. Both parties expressed that being labeled as an entity that is “for the administration” resulted in unfavorable treatment from the student body. As a result, their compassion for students’ welfare and loyalty to their professional role is overshadowed by this label. Similar to the modern usage of “The Trump Administration” or “The Obama Administration,” this rhetorical effect strikes fear into the audience by painting the administration as an unknown, dominating entity.

Effectiveness of the collaborative approach to advocacy

As demonstrated in the findings, the persona of the administration ultimately affects the way ASPNU approaches advocacy efforts. The dissociation tool defines the organizational culture of ASPNU as one that fundamentally against this other organization - the administration. The terms “collaboration” and “collaborative mindset” were frequently used to frame how APSNU’s approaches the relationship with administration. Johnston’s study can be applied to this phenomenon, in which students sought to understand administrative agenda, and ultimately became more ambitious and reforming those agendas (Johnston, 2015). Although ASPNU believes they prioritized collaboration with this administration, it was unclear where the collaborative efforts were being achieved from both parties. Despite the ASPNU-led tuition strike resulting in a reduced tuition increase, their relationship with the administration was left with a scar. As recognized in Johnston’s study, this student mobilization was backed by the desire to reform institutional policies (Johnston, 2015). Additionally, “collaboration” was also used when referencing ASPNU’s relationship with the student body and the relationships created

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by members within the organization. First, ASPNU representatives believed they had garnered a strong, collaborative relationship with the student body, but some staff members believed they were not completely intentional with being representational of all perspectives. However, ASPNU members referred to explicit outreach models, such as generating mid-term voter turnout and connecting with incoming students. Second, ASPNU members feel that collaboration within their organization has created autonomy through political debates and encouraging minority voices to participate. The conclusions presented by Loader et. al determined that, in order to become self-actualized, students must be able to engage with political groups of like-minded individuals, and ultimately achieve autonomy (Loader et. al 2015). As such, ASPNU functions as an organization that seeks to provide that platform. Fundamentally, ASPNU uses this term to reinforce their interpersonal and communicative behaviors and cultural values, and ultimately the initial approaches to advocacy tactics.

APSNU as an advocacy mediator

Gray's study on the spread of political messaging initiated by grassroots efforts and Kennelly's study on the success of an 'organizing culture' can both be applied to the behaviors of ASPNU members. Kennelly outlined that organizing cultures are effective by connecting arguments to larger causes (Kennelly, 2014), while Gray suggested that social media enhances grassroots messages and empowers individuals to voice their opinions (Gray, 2018). Both cultural phenomena are demonstrated in the PNU study by the effective spread of the tuition freeze campaign and the Disarm PNU movement. Fundamentally, ASPNU wears two hats. One hat says, "We are a PNU recognized organization that operates in within the university and alongside administrative policy-makers." The other hat says, "We are a student group driven by the values and beliefs of our students." The first hat categorizes cultural actions as those that are

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motivated by seeking legitimacy through accomplishing institutional reform and maintaining relationships with administrative members. The latter hat categorizes their behaviors as motivated by grassroots efforts and values. The combination of these hats defines ASPNU as an advocacy mediator. Although ASPNU staked a claim to initiating the tuition freeze campaign and executed significant efforts to modify campus safety policies, the organization remains both liberated and limited by its dual-status. For example, when faced with the aftermath of the shooting, ASPNU quickly became fierce advocates for institutional policy reform, as demonstrated in the meeting minutes and passionate debates in executive board meetings. The loudest voices in the room become the ones that drive the narrative and empower members to take up agency. However, the administration remains seen as a barrier in their path to institutional change, and to some, it is viewed as opportunity for collaboration. As a result, the elected representatives of ASPNU create and reinforce their cultural values through acting on their motivations presented in both hats, and in turn, this influences their routes for advocacy.

Conclusion

The path to institutional change is a winding road for ASPNU, however both staff and student government members believe advocacy is the root for instigating such change. Overall, this study discovered that the student government culture is one that operates as an advocacy mediator, as ASPNU works to prioritize the needs of students over the administrative agendas. Yet, ASPNU advocacy tactics are influenced by the image of the administration. This study also highlighted the role of political rhetoric as a tool to reinforce the advocacy values within the culture. This ideology is represented throughout modern culture through the spread of political messaging that allows a culture to unify around a singular cause. The limitations of this study include lack of prior research on the topic and a small participant pool, particularly the lack of

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willing student participants. As a result, a majority of the conclusions that reflected student representatives were driven by select interviews and observations of group interactions and individual behaviors. Furthermore, as students across the country continue to take up the agency to actively advocate for their demands, it is important to achieve a holistic understanding of the effects of advocacy on both students and the administration. As such, future research should explore the culture within administration, and seek to understand how student protests affect the political discourse between politics-makers. Such research may seek to explore why this is a trend across college campuses, and seek alternative solutions to create new and productive cultural dynamics.

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