

Student Political Engagement in the Co-Curriculum:
Understanding the Role of Senior Student Affairs Officers

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Abstract

The apolitical nature of the civic engagement movement poses challenges to American democracy. The co-curricular experience in higher education is well positioned to address this phenomenon, but little research exists to inform practice. This article highlights the results of a qualitative study that examined how the socialization of senior student affairs officers influenced their approaches to students' civic and political development. Implications for practice and future research are presented based on the study findings.

Keywords: political engagement, student affairs, college students

In their book *“To Serve a Larger Purpose”* (2011), John Saltmarsh and Matthew Hartley gathered insights from academic leaders across the United States regarding the state of the civic engagement movement in higher education. As their central critique, the authors maintained that the civic engagement movement promotes community service activities but rarely challenges the status quo or larger political structures, and therefore fails ultimately to alter norms of academic and institutional culture. Campus stakeholders, the authors argued, should instead promote democratic engagement, linking the processes of engagement with the historic democratic purposes of higher education in order to facilitate positive changes in society and foster student civic agency. Thus, the deepening of higher education’s public purpose requires more than a rhetorical shift in how stakeholders talk about civic engagement; rather, it involves confronting the apoliticism of civic activities on campuses. If students remain ignorant of the political systems that perpetuate power and inequality and of the political levers available to create change in a democracy, then the work of the movement will be relegated to volunteerism and stopgap service, falling short of democratic engagement. In light of these concerns, a number of questions arise for leaders of the movement: Whose responsibility is it to foster the civic development of students? What role (if any) do faculty and administrative staff have in supporting the civic and political development of students? How do these institutional stakeholders make sense of their role in relation to institutional efforts to promote democratic engagement for students?

While student affairs professionals’ contribution to promoting democratic engagement through service-learning has been the subject of considerable research (Astin & Sax, 1998; Ehrlich, 2000; Jacoby, 1996, 2009), the ways in which they make sense of their responsibility in assisting students in developing skills for democratic engagement has received far less attention. To address this gap in the field’s understanding, this study explored ways in which senior student affairs officers (SSAOs) conceived of their roles in helping students acquire the skills for democratic engagement. Our study builds on prior research suggesting that the professional training and philosophy of SSAOs influences their decisions about which values and educational goals to infuse within student affairs departments (Hernandez & Hernández, 2014; Sandeen, 1991). In examining this issue, the study sought to understand how the socialization processes experienced by SSAOs inculcates them with certain values that then influence their approach to supporting student development for democratic engagement.

Study Rationale

The mission statements of many colleges and universities include language describing commitments to promoting and fostering a larger democratic purpose through research and teaching (Morphew & Hartley, 2006; Saltmarsh & Hartley, 2011). As a result of a growing perception that higher education is losing sight of its public purpose, hundreds of campuses around the country have sought to reclaim this mission over the past two decades (Hartley, 2009). However, at issue is whether higher education institutions are truly committed to the ideal of democratic engagement and, if so, how best to realize this larger public purpose (National Task Force, 2012).

There exists no theoretical framework in higher education research designed to definitively guide an inquiry into the ways in which SSAOs make sense of their roles in assisting with the development of students' democratic engagement skills. This is due to a lack of theoretical work accounting for the unique co-curricular aspects of higher education. Much of the extant scholarship on the ways in which higher education fosters political engagement in particular has focused on academic curricula and interactions with faculty members (Harriger, 2010; Hillygus, 2005; McMillan & Harriger, 2002). One of the most comprehensive empirical studies, the Political Engagement Project (PEP) (Colby, Beaumont, Ehrlich, & Corngold, 2010), found that courses and programs with democratic aims tend to result in students acquiring an increased knowledge of political structures and topics without changing their existing political ideology. These findings are significant because they counter the thinking of some prominent academic commentators that promoting political engagement in college classrooms persuades students to adopt the political beliefs of their professors (Fish, 2004). In their conclusion, Colby et al. advocated for the need to better understand the influence of co-curricular life. In response, our study builds on what little is known about student political engagement in the co-curricular environment and explores ways SSAOs make sense of their role in fostering programming and opportunities for students that enable or inhibit students from effectively engaging in public work and everyday politics (Boyte, 2005). Boyte (2004) conceptualized "public work and everyday politics" simply as the way people in any setting deal with differences to get something done. Politics means creating alliances, negotiating, engaging people around self-interests, and using levers of change strategically. Politics is how

diverse groups of people build a future together. With this definition in mind, the following questions guided this study:

- Do SSAOs interpret fostering opportunities to build skills for public work and everyday politics as an aspect of their roles on campus?
- What formal and informal socialization processes do SSAOs point to as informing their views about their roles in assisting students' development of political engagement skills?

Literature Review

Background and Context

Political engagement broadly and Boyte's (2005) notion of public work and everyday politics in particular are difficult to study because of the innumerable ways these concepts are operationalized by different people, cultures, and geographic regions. Building skills to engage in everyday politics involves a combination of distinct psychological and emotional characteristics coupled with tangible actions (e.g., voting) that a person must acquire, develop, and enact over the course of his or her lifetime. Numerous scholars have taken up the challenge of describing the process of—and providing recommendations on how people might go about—developing the skills needed to engage effectively in public work. For example, Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (2000) comprised an influential analysis of civic engagement in the United States, arguing that civic and political activity are in decline because Americans have less social capital than they once did due to generational shifts away from participation in communal activities such as attending church or bowling in a league. Putnam asserted that this decline in involvement in communal activities is problematic because, through such organizations, citizens have an opportunity to develop political skills necessary for participation in political life. However, other scholars have stressed the importance of distinguishing between civic activity and political activity because of the different set of motivations, skills, and outcomes associated with each (Colby et al., 2010; Dalton, 2008; Zukin, Keeter, Andolina, Jenkins, & Delli Carpini, 2006). An important reason for avoiding this conflation is that the aims of political engagement, specifically to interact with and change political structures, are different from that of civic activity, which includes communal helping behaviors such as apolitical volunteerism (Boyte, 2005; Saltmarsh & Hartley, 2011).

The generational cohort most likely to engage in apolitical volunteerism at the expense of political engagement tends to be younger, traditional college-age students (Zukin et al., 2006). Thus, it is imperative to focus on this demographic since it represents a developmental stage during which many formative, lifelong habits are established (Torres, Jones, & Renn, 2009). The contemporary understanding of student political engagement asserts that college students are more politically active than their non-college-going peers, but as a cohort (Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement [CIRCLE], 2012) they are less politically engaged than older generations (Zukin et al., 2006). Not only are contemporary college students less politically active than older Americans, they are also less politically active than college students were in the 1960s and 1970s—even after accounting for recent surges in young adult political participation (CIRCLE, 2014; Sax, 2004). Scholars who have studied this discrepancy have determined that many young adults, namely traditional-age college students, have turned to apolitical civic engagement as a result of their distrust of and frustration with traditional politics (CIRCLE, 2007; Ehrlich, 2000; Zukin et al., 2006). This is an interesting finding in light of Saltmarsh and Hartley's (2011) assertion that, too often, higher education institutions eschew training students for meaningful participation in political life, tending instead to provide service and volunteer opportunities that strengthen civic activity.

Political Identity Development in College

Although contested by some (Kam & Palmer, 2008, 2011), many scholars have concluded that a person's college experience influences his or her political identity development (Dodson, 2014; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2004; Zukin et al., 2006). While there is no evidence that an individual changes completely his or her political ideology (e.g., entering college with a conservative political orientation and exiting as a liberal), there is evidence that people do slightly moderate their political beliefs and self-understanding as a result of aspects of their college experience such as exposure to diverse students and courses that challenge previously held political beliefs (Colby et al., 2010; Dodson, 2014; Hurtado, 2007). Other important political socializing forces include one's experiences with one's family and in one's communities prior to college. These experiences contribute to an individual's early conception of his or her political knowledge, skills, and habits that combine to set the foundation of political identity (Andolina, Jenkins, Zukin, & Keeter, 2003; Campbell, 2010). Whereas parents, guardians, and community

stakeholders, such as religious leaders, are clearly identified in the political socialization literature as important contributors to a person's political identity development prior to college and outside of the K-12 classroom, the same clarity is lacking around which higher education socializing agents, beyond professors, are integral to student's political identity development—although some have alluded to the important role of student affairs administrators (Sponsler & Hartley, 2013).

Since this study focused on how student affairs administrators made sense of their roles and were socialized by their colleges and professional associations, we concentrated mostly on socialization within organizations. Socialization within professional organizations is an important vehicle for acclimating new employees to the goals, strategies, and values of a company, organization, or school (Schein, 2004). Socialization involves both formal and informal processes (Kanter, 1972; Pratt, 2000). Formal processes include guidelines laid out within position descriptions, orientation processes, and merit pay structures. Informal socialization takes place through interactions with and signals sent to new employees about what type of work is valued and how they might be successful. Informal socialization is often delivered through conversations new employees have with veteran employees, and through observations of other successful organizational members. The primary goal of socialization processes is to ensure that a new person becomes a member of an organization by adopting the strategies and values of that organization (Kanter, 1972). Thus, socialization is an important strategy for maintaining organizational culture. Socialization within academic spaces is a nonlinear and ongoing process as members may be socialized to adopt new institutional priorities or receive messages from a new unit or organizational leader (Austin, 2002). While considerable research has explored faculty socialization, much less has centered on the socialization of administrators (Bogler & Kremer-Hayon, 1999; Bragg, 1976; Gardner & Barnes, 2007; Margolis & Romero, 1998). Moreover, few if any studies have explored how senior-level university administrators are socialized to address political issues and the political development of students.

More important than this gap in the literature are the consequences for public life implied by the failure of higher education institutions to enact democratic engagement. Contemporary politics is plagued by increasing political polarization (Abramowitz, 2010), declining deliberative democracy (Mutz, 2006), lack of citizen engagement, and wide chasms between citizens' expectations for

democracy and their satisfaction with the way society functions (Norris, 2011). In order for institutions to realize the vision articulated by Saltmarsh and Hartley (2011) for democratic engagement—one which involves both curricular and co-curricular life—it is important to consider the role of SSAOs in fostering skills that help students engage in everyday politics (Boyte, 2005).

Study Significance

Higher education's role in improving democratic life by better equipping college students with the skills, knowledge, and motivation to be politically engaged is one that higher education has tried to fill since its inception. In 1740, when envisioning the Academy of Philadelphia, which would later become the University of Pennsylvania, Benjamin Franklin (1749) noted:

The idea of what is true merit, should also be often presented to youth, explain'd and impress'd on their minds, as consisting in an inclination, join'd with an Ability to serve mankind, one's country, friends and family...which Ability should be the great Aim and End of all Learning.

Likewise, many higher education institutions have established in their missions a commitment to a larger purpose of contributing to democratic engagement through research and teaching (Saltmarsh & Hartley, 2011). While colleges and universities have made enormous progress in reclaiming their civic purpose, as asserted by Saltmarsh and Hartley (2011), these activities have tended to promote civic activity rather than skills for everyday politics.

Although student affairs professionals comprise a prime stakeholder group well positioned to advance democratic engagement in higher education, these professionals are unfortunately not reaching their full potential in this area (National Task Force, 2012). Yet, over the last 50 years, the field of student affairs, which has fundamentally concerned itself with co-curricular spaces on college campuses, has slowly shifted toward deliberately supporting and promoting student learning and engagement in multiple educational domains (American College Personnel Association, 2010). The influential report *Learning Reconsidered* highlighted the need for student affairs to view learning as “a comprehensive, holistic, transformative activity that integrates academic learning and student development” (American College Personnel Association, 2004, p. 2). The report also identified civic engagement, broadly conceptualized to include political engagement, as one of seven general desired learning outcomes of higher education.

As mentioned earlier, much of the work informing the field's understanding of this outcome has centered almost exclusively on apolitical forms of civic engagement (Jacoby, 2009). Consequently, little is known about how student affairs professionals contribute to the skills students need to engage in everyday politics. With the established trend of young adult and college student political disengagement, and the espoused commitment of higher education institutions to a larger purpose, this study illuminates the ways in which SSAOs make sense of, and are socialized for, their roles within the public purpose of their institutions.

Research Design

For this study, the research team used a constructivist, multi-case-study approach to illuminate the research phenomenon (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Yin, 2013). Constructivism emphasizes capturing and honoring multiple perspectives and thinking about the relationship between the investigator and those being investigated (Gubrium & Holstein, 2008; Patton, 2015). In particular, we were concerned with how participants made sense of the socialization processes they had undergone regarding their involvement with students' development of skills needed to engage in everyday politics (Schein, 1985). Further, this study examined the ways in which SSAOs enacted their roles in light of the socialization they had received. An exploratory multi-case-study approach allowed for a consistent analysis across all of the participants' experiences (Yin, 2013). The unit of analysis for the cases was the participants' reflections on their beliefs about their role in fostering opportunities for student political engagement as well as their reflections on the socialization processes they had experienced in relation to their own political skill building.

Data Sources

The research team used purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2012; Patton, 2015). Sampling involved contacting leaders of national associations that promote democratic engagement on college campuses in the United States (e.g., NASPA, AAC&U) for recommendations of SSAOs whom these leaders believed were knowledgeable about fostering opportunities for student skill building for everyday politics in the co-curricular context. This method of recruitment was necessary to involve participants who could provide "thick descriptions" of the topic of study (Charmaz, 2014). The research team also solicited names from higher education faculty members whose research agendas center on civic engagement, and from

participants at the end of each interview, a strategy consistent with snowball sampling (Patton, 2015). In all, 50 people were invited to participate in the study. Twenty-three interviews were completed with SSAOs from every region of the United States and one from Mexico.

The SSAOs represented several types of not-for profit institutions including community colleges, land-grant universities, elite private institutions, and regional comprehensive universities. Most participants had been in their positions for more than five years and in the field of student affairs for over 15 years. Twenty participants identified as White and approximately two thirds of the sample identified as female. All but one had earned a doctoral degree. The average portfolio of responsibilities of the 23 SSAOs included numerous direct reports who oversaw different functional areas such as housing and residence life, recreational sports, career advising, counseling and wellness centers, judicial affairs, and student activities.

Data Collection

Interviews—which in constructivist research are “guided conversations” (Lofland & Lofland, 1995)—comprised the primary source of data in this study. Interviews allowed the research team to elicit in-depth experience of each participant as it pertained to their understanding of the socialization processes that shaped their approach to fostering opportunities for student political engagement (Charmaz, 2008). Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and followed a semi-structured interview protocol (Fontana & Frey, 2005). The interview protocol included questions about the SSAO’s own college experiences with political engagement, guidelines given to the SSAO dictating their involvement with student political engagement, and advice they gave to new staff members about how to help students develop political skills and efficacies. Field notes were taken during interviews (Patton, 2015). The research team digitally recorded and transcribed interviews verbatim into text documents. In order to corroborate information from the interviews, a complimentary data source included a thorough review of campus websites, websites of the offices of the participants, and other relevant and available information that could be deemed as signifiers of institutional mission and culture (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2010; Morphey & Hartley, 2006; Schein, 1985).

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using a two-step coding process (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2013). The research team identified a set of deductive codes drawn from existing literature on student political engagement and our own experiences working to foster student political engagement (Miles et al., 2013; Patton, 2015). Each researcher read every interview transcript and applied codes to segments of texts that captured the essence of individual codes. Inductive codes were added for segments of text that did not fit into established deductive codes. After 10 transcripts had been coded independently in order to establish inter-rater agreement, we met to discuss the inductive codes that had emerged as well as similarities and differences in how codes were being applied, engaging in this process until consensus was built. For the second round of coding, we combined related codes based on how the codes answered the research questions and created parent code themes (Miles et al., 2013).

In all, four themes related to our research questions emerged from the analysis. Given the research questions, Schein's (1985) model of organizational culture, which comprises the informal and formal signifiers of the espoused and enacted goals and values of an organization, as well as Pratt's work on informal and formal socialization processes were useful in understanding the themes by highlighting the tensions and dynamics between SSAO's socialization toward fostering opportunities for students to build skills to engage in everyday politics and the ways in which they traversed campus norms, values, and their own beliefs and assumptions.

Trustworthiness and Study Limitations

To insure the trustworthiness (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) of the study, the research team used triangulation through multiple data sources and participants (Denzin, 1970; Mathison, 1988). We also sought disconfirming evidence by combing the data for evidence that disproved emergent themes (Miles et al., 2013). We member checked by sending a subset of our participants transcripts of their interviews and allowing them to read, edit, and provide reflective feedback (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Miles et al., 2013; Patton, 2015). Finally, we used a peer debriefer, who was familiar with the research topic and the field of higher education (Miles et al., 2013; Patton, 2015), to audit our analyses and conclusions. Although these efforts enhanced the trustworthiness of the study, there is an important caveat we

wish to make explicit. The purpose of this study was not to make sweeping generalizations about all SSAOs or the skills students need to engage in everyday politics or public work. While the research team sampled SSAOs from a wide array of institutions, readers should consider their institutions' unique context when trying to understand the transferability of our findings.

Findings

The themes that arose during analysis concerned how the personal background of each participant and the campus culture in which he or she worked combined to shape an SSAO's approaches to fostering the skills students need to engage in everyday politics. The findings are presented in a fashion that accentuates some of the contrasts that emerged among the SSAO responses, which illuminate different socialization processes and their resulting influences on how these SSAOs engaged their roles on campus.

Varying Definitions of Student Political Engagement: Traditional vs. "On the Ground" Politics

An important aspect of organizational socialization for SSAOs is how they come to understand and internalize the meanings of words and phrases related to everyday politics. Hence, we were curious to ascertain how SSAOs defined political engagement. Specifically, we wished to understand how SSAOs arrived at these definitions and how these definitions informed their approach and attitudes about facilitating student political engagement. In describing student political engagement, one participant detailed how a combination of approaches to civic engagement can be inclusive of aspects of political engagement such as petitioning election officials:

The civic engagement piece ... is really getting involved and having a partnership in the local community, but also being able to advocate for resources from people who have power. So, it's multidirectional.

However, not all definitions offered by participants were this broad. The following quote by one interviewee reflects a view of student political engagement commonly found in the literature (e.g., Colby et al., 2010; Dalton, 2008),

I really do think of it a lot more in my mind of the party affiliations or being affiliated with a particular ... set of ideals, more so than the civic

engagement piece. In my mind, I do have a distinct marker between those things.

Similarly, another participant echoed this distinction:

[P]olitical engagement is really thinking about ... broader structural change whereas a lot of students are also doing this very on the ground, face-to-face, sort of service work, but not necessarily engaging politically.

By way of contrast, another participant noted that political engagement is different from politicized structures, or what he called “partisan politics,” and is meant to produce results right away instead of being caught in partisan battles. To clarify this point, he said:

[T]o me, politics is.... working directly with people because I think that in partisan politics ... you see what’s happening now with Obama, he can’t get anything done.

A consistent theme throughout the interviews was that the definitions of political engagement were moderated by the participants’ understanding of how to effect political change in the United States. To many participants, political change either happened through distant, structured, and politicized channels or through more informal, grassroots, and direct-action activities that typically took place as near to an issue as possible. These two understandings echo that of the literature describing the differences between civic activity and political engagement (Colby et al., 2010; Dalton, 2008). Only a few participants articulated a definition of political engagement as a combination of both. SSAOs cited their own experiences with political engagement, or apathy about politics, along with their salient social identities, including those drawn from their gender, socioeconomic, racial, and sexual identities, as informing their understanding of how societal change occurs. For participants who, as undergraduate students, had been involved in affinity groups, these experiences would later shape their beliefs about how political change comes about. Conversely, for those that tended to engage in volunteerism and service activities, they believed that direct support for social institutions instead of engagement with the political process was the best way to affect change.

Challenges Associated with Assessing Student Political Engagement

Very few SSAOs in this study had made attempts to assess the political engagement of their students. For those who had, they consistently cited the

difficulty of developing metrics that made sense. The following quote highlights the difficulties SSAOs experience in attempting to both define and assess student political engagement:

In what ways do we assess students' political engagement? You know, I don't know that we do. I know that we assess community engagement ... I think it depends on how you are defining political engagement. Is it running for office? Is it encouraging people like our student government president? He is graduating in May and I talked to him yesterday and his goal is to run for congress in 2020.... Is voting political engagement? Is being involved in your community political engagement? Is seeking out all of the amazing speakers we have come to campus that talk about world issues, domestic issues ... so that they understand? Is reading the newspaper political engagement? That you aren't reading the sports section but you are actually understanding and you need to know what's happening in the world that is affecting you and that you could affect? ... Yeah, we can certainly say that we note through our computer system that X number of students have donated X number hours or contributed so many hours to the community. We can check community service, but engagement is a different question. Yeah, because you can't assess something until you've defined it.

In order for SSAOs to assess whether students are building skills to engage in everyday politics, they must define what this behavior or these skills look like. Without a clear definition, as this quote shows, it is difficult to devise assessment metrics and tools. The quote also demonstrates that, lacking a clear definition, student volunteer hours are used as a proxy for student political engagement. Another SSAO, who was faced with this same challenge, reported using student leadership as a proxy for political engagement: "We assess the ... students in the program. We do pre and post tests on them from a leadership standpoint, but it's not specific to political engagement."

In a contemporary environment in which administrators expect student affairs departments to articulate the ways in which their work contributes to the learning and development of students, an inability to assess student political learning or engagement in co-curricular spaces presents myriad challenges for SSAOs. Our participants identified two unique reasons for this difficulty. For some, assessment was difficult because they could not always measure what they were interested in as it related to student political engagement. One participant pointed

to the shortcomings of surveys for assessing student political engagement and development:

[It's] a disservice to the students and to us if we narrow their learning in such a way. Like, really, we need to think about how to assess [student political engagement] in a more holistic way, because this isn't a numbers game. Especially when you are talking about such broad, amorphous, sort of developmental pieces. So, a lot to think about because what we are doing with them is so hard to quantify. Political engagement or civic engagement—[it's] hard to quantify.

Participants indicated that another challenge in assessing student political engagement was a lack of proper structures and contact with students which ordinarily help student affairs departments collect data that can be used to inform departmental approaches to student political engagement. One participant, after describing how her office assesses student learning in general, detailed the difficulty she faced when trying specifically to assess student political engagement:

We haven't jumped to that step, partially because we don't directly advise each group, so we certainly care about their experiences as leaders, and we try to, as we connect with them, encourage them to link up with our leadership programs and some of our other tools, and then we assess those tools and the people that do that, but we have not, from our office ... looked at assessing, what the cocurricular pieces for political activity, political programming.

It is important to note that the majority of participants had not considered assessment in this context until we asked them about it, which may reflect the socialization they had undergone as well as their understanding of their roles and responsibilities. Specifically, a lack of formal structures, including an institutional definition of student political engagement and assessment processes for measuring political engagement, points to a lack of formal socialization processes that compelled these professionals to push for comprehensive opportunities for students to build political skills.

Importance of Political Neutrality

Perhaps the most telling finding in our study was that the SSAOs felt they were required to maintain political neutrality in their roles as senior administrators, regardless of whether their institution was public or private. This is perhaps

unsurprising given that colleges and universities are often called on to be neutral in political matters and elections (Byrne, 1993; Orlin, 1981). SSAOs in this study indicated that neutrality was necessary for political debates or discussions on campus. When describing how to maintain neutrality, SSAOs said that it was important that “all voices” be represented in any political issue, debate, or activity. Moreover, SSAOs shared their beliefs that they must not reveal their own political opinions.

SSAOs frequently asserted that neutrality was vital for fostering student learning, making clear their belief that student affairs programming—political or otherwise—should focus solely on student development, not the political views and opinions of SSAOs. One participant recounted that in the lead up to an on-campus political debate, she told her staff:

“You may have very strong political connections or political persuasion for one party or another, but in your role, it is not part of your responsibility to promote that.” We said, “You have to be Switzerland.” And we used that example because part of a debate is ... helping those people who are undecided as well as decided, to understand the other side, or both sides.

This quote reflects a sentiment shared by many of the SSAOs included in this study. Specifically, it clearly lays out requirements for staff, complete with measures for assessing them as they perform their roles—a telling example when compared with the challenge SSAOs reported in assessing student political engagement. As this instance reveals, while campuses generally lack metrics for understanding student political engagement, they possess measures to assess the neutrality of student affairs offices. In this way, one institutional value and priority is assessed and advanced (political neutrality) while another (creating avenues for student political engagement) is not.

Another participant explained how she operationalized her political neutrality following a campus-wide viewing of the State of the Union address. In an email to her staff prior to the event, she wrote:

It was perfectly acceptable to say, “Did you watch the state of the union address? What did you think of it?”, and prompt their [students’] own critical thinking, but not to give your own opinion of whether or not you thought the president did a good job or not, or whether you agreed.

She went on to say that she received push back from some staff members but that her response was, “It’s not about us. It’s about them.” Here, we see political neutrality invoked in order to foster and maintain a culture centering on student learning, despite the learning that might come from a culture that embraces the exchange of political ideas between student affairs staff and students. By sending an email to her employees, this SSAO ensured that they were being socialized to maintain neutrality.

Additionally, participants noted that political neutrality served as a mechanism for creating an inclusive and welcoming environment for all students. One participant said that she told her staff members that:

I know some of their political beliefs and some of their religious beliefs. I think that they do a really good job of maintaining ... this neutrality with the whole thing. And I think that it’s because of who they are. You know, it’s higher education, and we’re working in a democratized environment, and we’re also working in a public institution ... that has this mission of open access and inclusion and engagement of all people, of all religions, of all socioeconomic backgrounds - and so I think that that kind of falls into place in some ways because of the nature of working in a community college, that if you have so much bias, you’re not really going to survive in this environment.

This quote not only captures the important role that institutional culture plays but also how the philosophy and guiding values of the participants became evident in their approach to guiding and supporting others around interacting with students on issues that are political in nature.

“Rules for Engagement” for SSAOs

We found that with just one exception, SSAOs’ understanding of their roles with regard to student political engagement were not written protocols but instead were communicated through informal messages received from institutional and professional peers. In this way, the primary vehicle for socializing SSAOs about their role in student political development was through informal messaging (Pratt, 2000). The only instance of formal socialization of SSAOs within our study was a participant who was given instruction in the campus ethics training which dictated that she not take “a political stance” on any issue. She was also told that it was important to keep “a very clean line of not taking a political stance as a

professional” and that the line between herself as an SSAO and as a private citizen must remain firmly in place.

SSAOs received numerous informal messages guiding their perception that neutrality was an important part of their job. In one instance, a participant was told by superiors simply that she should not be politically engaged, saying that, “The only thing that I’ve heard about political engagement so far is for me as an employee, which has basically been: Don’t do it.” The SSAOs also received informal messages from the culture of the institution, derived from the institution’s source of control (i.e., public versus private, with public institutions being more reticent to promote student political engagement), liberal arts traditions, the reputation of the institution as being political, and institutional histories (i.e. community colleges, historic women’s colleges, etc.). Institutional culture is also derived from the composition and political dispositions of incoming students. If incoming students tended to be more activist, the student affairs administration and programming reflected this activism by providing opportunities for political development and involvement. One SSAO in our study who described his campus as “politically vibrant” recalled that he had a series of questions he would pose to his staff when students approached them to become involved in political issues. The questions included prompts for his staff to “think about how they align with students” so that if they were ever asked if they knew about a student political event, they would be prepared to respond about how they carried out their administrative responsibilities. An additional question he posed to his staff required them to “clarify how their own political values and convictions” intersected with their work with students so that they could understand and avert potential areas of conflict. Another example of how dynamic a culture can be came from a representative from a community college that was experiencing student demographic shifts; thus, their approaches to interacting with political issues raised by students was changing. The SSAO at the community college noted that a few years prior, one of his staff members raised the issue that the campus climate was hostile for students identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender. As the college’s student population continued to change, the SSAO noted that the students began to demand changes, and, as a result, “the institution responded and began to come up with an action plan.”

Alternatively, if students tended to be apolitical or involved more in service and volunteerism than political issues, student programming tended to focus on

providing opportunities to foster civic activity. One SSAO explained that her campus had an endowed center for civic engagement that was popular among students and responsible for much of the programming on her campus. Yet, she revealed that the center tended to focus on “community service, service learning, and that kind of more civic engagement.” The different strands of this theme suggest that the culture of an institution plays an important role in shaping how student affairs professionals support student political engagement by providing (unwritten) rules. Additionally, SSAOs spoke of their efforts to contain and “reign in” student organizing when it threatened the status quo of the institution. Occasionally, SSAOs experienced tension when trying to maintain neutrality, especially when they agreed or disagreed with the political issue students were promoting. When this occurred, the SSAOs invoked a deeper set of values, referred to by one participant as a “moral compass,” in order to determine the best way to proceed. When asked to describe the content and origin of these values, the SSAOs said they were personal values that they had cultivated throughout their lives.

Discussion

Three important points emerged from the findings which expand the knowledge surrounding student political engagement as it relates to the creation of democratic engagement (Saltmarsh & Hartley, 2011) on college campuses. First, the overwhelming adherence on the part of SSAOs to the concept of political neutrality, despite a clear understanding of why the practice is so widespread, raises important questions. Calls for deliberative democracy (Conover, Searing, & Crewe, 2002; Gutmann, 1993; McMillan & Harriger, 2002; Mutz, 2006) and other research suggesting the importance of modeling healthy democratic practices (Hartley, 2009; Ostrander, 2004) reveal the lack of nuance in the politically neutral stance taken by our participants. In one sense, such neutrality represents a political act because it sends a message to students that there are times when and places where “being political” is misplaced. However, given the numerous calls for higher education to comprise a space for political learning (Galston, 2001; Hurtado, 2007; Levine, 2013; Saltmarsh & Hartley, 2011), student affairs professionals should take advantage of every opportunity to foster skill building for everyday politics.

Therefore, there is a need for greater awareness about how and when political neutrality is utilized by SSAOs and the staffs they supervise. Yoo (2010) “parsed” neutrality by describing ambivalence (balance of positive and negative affect) versus indifference (lack of either). For example, if appearing politically

neutral or ambivalent is done in an effort to bring opposing ideological sides together for healthy discussion (i.e., deliberative dialogue), then the appearance of neutrality may be warranted. However, if neutrality is used as a crux to avoid engaging students in the political realm at all (i.e., indifference), then opportunities to help students build skills for everyday politics may be missed. Additionally, it is critical to consider the larger philosophical question of whether it is possible for a person to truly be, or appear to be, neutral in matters of politics when certain social identities are inherently power-laden (Crenshaw, 1991).

The findings also revealed that the SSAOs viewed fostering political engagement as part of their roles, but only insofar as it fit into their broader goals for their campuses such as holistic development of students or student learning. This sentiment aligns with research that highlights civic engagement (broadly defined) as an important aspect of student affairs work (American College Personnel Association, 2004; National Task Force, 2012). While this conflation may seem logical, we contend that a lack of understanding about what practices and environments contribute to student political engagement, along with the inability of SSAOs to assess student political engagement, limits students' exposure to political learning and engagement. Political engagement in college would benefit from a focus on assessment research and pedagogy akin to the same focus received by service-learning over the past 20 years (Butin, 2003; Jacoby, 2003; Saltmarsh, 2004).

Finally, the findings frame the contours of an intersection among students, student affairs professionals, and the broader campus environment. The ways in which students develop skills to engage in everyday politics and the ways in which SSAOs conceive of their roles in supporting this engagement are nested in a specific historical and sociopolitical milieu on college campuses in which neutrality and a desire to squash student protests has been present and was exacerbated by student unrest in the 1960s (Byrne, 1993; Orlin, 1981; Thelin, 2004).

Implications and Future Research

The exploratory nature of this study presented numerous ideas for practice and future research that might address some of the issues raised in the discussion section and contribute to higher education's and student affairs' understanding of student political engagement. First, we recommend that SSAOs encourage their staff to foster conversations about politics and to model healthy democratic

practices with students. The fear of indoctrination is overblown; indeed, recent studies have shown that students are unlikely to change their political ideologies in college, even when presented with political engagement pedagogies (Colby et al., 2010; Dodson, 2014). Moreover, we believe that there are potentially troubling tradeoffs involved in insisting on a neutral political culture, especially when such a culture renders apolitical student affairs programming. Forced neutrality creates certain tensions around the authenticity of SSAOs. Student affairs professionals must be neutral and convey all sides, but what happens when they feel passionately about an issue and are not able to convey their beliefs? Is that the best message to send students who are developing political skills, that they must hide their beliefs in public and professional spaces? Might that neuter their desire to engage in political issues? When considering deeply held sociopolitical values, such as those around social justice, how much neutrality should be expected? This tension is particularly problematic when considering the democratic engagement framework offered by Saltmarsh and Hartley (2011). A democratic society is not a neutral space. Indeed, political structures, democratic debates, and civic activities are inherently biased as various interests and opinions contest for legitimacy and codification. It is on this multiplicity of perspectives that our country's democracy was founded. What is lost when we strip SSAOs of their ability to demonstrate their own beliefs?

In order to enact democratic engagement on college campuses, we believe that students must see democratic practices modeled for them and be given opportunities to engage with people whose political views are contrary to their own. We assert that student affairs professionals are well positioned to be a part of this mode of learning. Accordingly, student affairs professionals have a responsibility to be actively involved with and engaged in political issues to maintain a campus political climate that is inclusive and relevant to all students, regardless of their political orientation or skills. An example of this in practice would be ensuring that students are represented on all departmental committees and have a voice and authority equal to other members.

Another important implication for practice is that though leadership is crucial for fostering student political engagement, it does not have to be top-down. The SSAOs in our study frequently mentioned the work of energized entry- and mid-level colleagues that contributed to their understanding of student political engagement. The lesson here is that someone or some people must take ownership

and responsibility for pushing a department (for instance) to consider student political engagement or else it will be very easy for the concept to get lost in the shuffle of competing priorities. Ideally, a campus or student affairs department would have a clear definition of what constitutes student political skill building, an understanding of the activities that promote it, and assessment strategies to measure it. In turn, these learning experiences could align the programs and practices of all divisions within a department to support different aspects of student political engagement. Furthermore, SSAOs' awareness of their own beliefs and values with regard to their roles in facilitating student political engagement is critical to raising the status of student political engagement on campuses. Participants noted numerous times that our interviews were the first time that they had thought about issues of student political engagement generally, or assessing this engagement specifically. Since so much of this work is driven by one's convictions, experiences, and social identities, it is imperative that SSAOs are made aware of the underlying forces informing their approach to student political engagement. SSAOs' awareness of their roles should also be encouraged during staff meetings and especially during campus and national events that push sociopolitical issues to the forefront.

Finally, more training and research on student political engagement is needed to understand the processes and environments that affect SSAOs and students. Specifically, this study reveals a need to better understand the role professional socialization plays in guiding SSAOs in their facilitation of student political engagement and development. In addition, more research is needed that helps researchers understand how experiences in college contribute to student political identity development. Much of the knowledge base about student political engagement that participants were working from was anecdotal and localized. A logic model of student political identity development could help practitioners and departments ensure that their programs and practices are fostering a campus climate that is conducive to student political engagement. Once a logic model of student political identity development is created—minding the old adage that “what gets measured gets done”—assessment metrics and strategies must be created in order to further embed this work within college co-curricular cultures.

Conclusion

Each election cycle is accompanied by new reports about how young people, even those attending college, are politically disengaged and do not turn out to vote relative to other cohort groups (CIRCLE, 2007, 2014). Additionally, far too often college campuses are de facto ivory towers, remaining separate from public life. There are many plausible explanations for why this occurs, and this study presents another interpretation for why college students are not engaged, and why campuses struggle to enact democratic engagement. If the professionals that are responsible for fostering learning and development outside the classroom do not understand how students develop politically, are unable to assess political engagement, and practice philosophies that are counterproductive to these ends, it is no wonder that student political engagement and institutional democratic engagement goals remain elusive. A number of participants thanked us for the opportunity to think about these issues, saying that no one had previously engaged them in these ways. We take these expressions of gratitude as further evidence that higher education must organize around these issues. The findings suggest that much depends on the SSAO socialization processes as well as the campus culture. Thus, more time and attention must be given to intentionally crafting programs and practices that overcome inertial forces of the way things have been done and begin to rethink how co-curricular spaces can be leveraged to foster student political engagement.

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