Spring 5-17-2019

Improving the Practice of Advocacy Among Student Leaders at the University of San Diego

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Abstract

The purpose of the study was to improve how student affairs professionals can assist student leaders involved in the United Front Multicultural Commons (UFMC) to become better advocates for their needs at the University of San Diego. Utilizing O'Leary's cycle of action research, data was gathered in four cycles that included activities that focus on student engagement. Students kept a journal detailing some of their experiences and went through interviews and a focus group. Participants were from across the entire campus, but many were involved in student organizations and the UFMC. The findings indicate that students are aware of advocacy practices but need staff member support to better implement them.

Research Questions

The research questions for this study were: How can I best engage with students in the United Front Multicultural Commons (UFMC) to help them be more effective in advocating for their needs? And second, how do I support students so that they're comfortable enough to voice their needs? Finally, I also asked how can I work with the student participants to improve the practices of the UFMC, that promote student advocacy?

Introduction

Throughout the country, university campuses have their own uniqueness and differences in culture. Universities are looking to serve their student populations, though they are doing even though they may take different paths I believe. One thing essential to serving students is hearing and encouraging the student voice and students' self-advocacy. Depending on the campus, the student voice comes across differently. On some campuses, the students are marvelous when it comes to advocating for themselves and their needs, while on other campuses that same fire in the student's voice is not there.

Last academic year, the division of student affairs at the University of San Diego (USD) embarked on a reorganization of the entire division. Though no one lost their jobs, the personnel were switched around between departments and some centers were moved entirely to different parts of the campus. Stakeholders all around campus had different reactions, many of which were not happy. Many of the student leaders I engaged with, were particularly not pleased with the changes the division was going through. Many of the students were especially not happy with how the reorganization impacted the United Front Multicultural Center, which is now a commons as a result. The students felt that the changes were made in haste and did not account for them and their voices.

I first became aware of how students felt about the student affairs reorganization when I traveled to the University of California at Davis for a conference with some students. The conference we went to was put on by the California Council of Cultural Centers in Higher Education (CaCCCHE) and one of its themes was advocacy and student voice. As I was checking in with the students, they spoke to the fact that the change that came with the reorganization was not accommodating their needs and feelings about the structure that existed

before hand. Furthermore, they spoke about how there was much that still needed to happen at USD, which made me realize that their voices may not be reaching others, sparking an interest in this study.

Although, the reorganization came as a result of a Huron study through a survey that the university had conducted before hand. As I was observing the students mobilizing around the reorganization, I noticed that some of the students did not remember participating in study, which is why they felt like their voices had not been heard. As such, many of the students from across campus, including the ones who later participated in this study, organized meetings to discuss the changes as well as how they could express themselves and their feelings to the administrators that initiated the changes. They were looking to create something that could help them reach the leaders in student affairs, so they could feel heard and that the changes taking place would account for their needs. Though they were doing all this work and having those meetings, it felt like they were not going anywhere. It seemed like they could not agree with one another even though they were working toward the same goal.

As a student affairs practitioner, I place a high value on student satisfaction, voice, and service, as they contribute to the overall sense of belonging for the student. In my time at USD, I have not seen or heard students actively advocating and speaking out about their needs. This led me to consider research on student voice and self-advocacy. Specifically, looking at how students at USD are encouraged to speak and pursue their needs and how they are supported in continuing to speak and self-advocate for their needs.

Literature Review

In my journey into student affairs, one of the few words and phrases that have caught my attention is *student-centered,* which many higher education institutes use to describe their model.

During my time working in the UFMC, I have come to learn that the student voice is what drives this student-centered model. Parsons and Taylor (2011) stated, "Student engagement has primarily and historically focused upon increasing achievement, positive behaviors, and a sense of belonging in students so they might remain in school" (p. 4). Thus, my research focus was on student voice and how being heard increases students' sense of belonging.

Understanding and improving the student voice is an essential part of serving and retaining students. Mitra (2006) noted that, "through student voice opportunities, students can work with teachers and administrators to co-create the path of reform [which] will enable youth to meet their own developmental needs and will strengthen student ownership of the change process" (p. 1). Through understanding and promoting the student voice, the student is given the opportunity to go through transformational change. It is through that voice that students are able to take the reins of their education.

Due to student voice being the basis for my research, I wanted a definition in which to frame my understanding of the concept. Robinson and Taylor (2013) wrote that *student voice* advocates that the meaningful involvement of students requires "validating and authorizing them [students] to represent their own ideas, opinions, knowledge and experiences throughout education in order to improve our schools" (p. 1). Providing this meaningful engagement is serving the student holistically. Additionally, as Fielding (2004) stated, "student voice covers a range of activities that encourage reflection, discussion, dialogue and action on matters that primarily concern students, but also, by implication, school staff and the communities they serve" (p. 3). Ultimately, the promotion of student voice is about how the students are engaged and giving them a platform to express themselves and voice their needs. This can lead to more engagement, involvement, and participation across campus. Fletcher (2005) added to what

student involvement is by stating that "meaningful involvement for students leads to students increased capacity for empowered participation because it is demanding more than time, more than money, more than instantaneous results from students, educators, and administrators" (p. 18). Once students know and feel that they are being heard, their participation will hold meaning because it will feel less like the administration was just trying to meet a set agenda and they are actually invested in the holistic development of the student. Students can benefit from being given a higher stake into the operation and reform of the school and their education in a meaningful way that enhances their sense of belonging.

In 1993, the UFMC became a reality as a result of students using their voices to obtain a space where they could feel safe and welcomed on campus. As a graduate student for the UFMC one of my roles is to encourage students to speak up and be heard on many issues. As Robinson and Taylor (2007) pointed out, "the aim of student voice work is to listen to what [students] are saying about their views, thoughts, feelings and experiences" (p. 10). The underpinning behind student voice comes down to student experience, involvement, and level of engagement within their college or university.

One of the many matters affecting students at the university level is their background and the identities they hold. Gusa (2010) talked about how the "unexamined historically situated White cultural ideology embedded in the language, cultural practices, traditions, and perceptions of knowledge allow these institutions to remain racialized" (p. 2). This is important because the students in the UFMC have felt a racial divide and expressed concerns about being heard and valued. Furthermore, their various identities could be playing a significant role in how they perceive student voice and advocacy at the University of San Diego.

The University of San Diego is aiming for more diversity on campus, which is why looking at student voice from a multicultural lens is important. Shuford (2011) wrote that "multicultural services seek to build bridges between minoritized student populations and the broader institutional environment; between different groups of minoritized student populations, and across different cultural values and traditions, as well as communication styles" (p. 3). Through promoting the student voice, those bridges that Shuford talked about can be built. As student voice becomes more important, minoritized students should be supported with opportunities to voice their needs just as much as other students.

Multicultural centers have the priorities of promoting diversity and to me, diversity and student voice go hand in hand. The students frequenting multicultural centers are the embodiment of the diversity on their perspective campus and often, those same students have to raise their voice for change to occur. According to Princes (1994), diversity in America is as old as America itself and it is this diversity that has been instrumental in helping America to progress as it has. This diversity was represented in the students I work with, and I anticipate they will see improvements in how they advocate for their needs.

Theoretical Framework

Chickering's Theory of Identity Development

In addition to the literature above, this research was grounded in a couple theoretical frameworks of student development. There were three main theories that I focused on during the study. They are all theories I have regularly used to inform my work with students. The first theory incorporated in the study was Chickering's theory of identity development, otherwise known as the Seven Vectors of Development, with each vector representing an area for growth and development. As it was written by Chickering (1969),

students move through these vectors at different rates, that students may deal with issues from more than one vector at the same time, that vectors can interact with each other, and that students often find themselves reexamining issues associated with vectors they had previously worked through in a process of recycling. (as cited in Evans et al., 2009, p. 66)

Students do not have to go through each vector in a linear fashion. Despite that, students are able to build on each vector as issues and elements from other vectors can still emerge at any given point of the student's development.

This was essential because I was asking participants to reflect on past experiences on campus, and how that has played a role in the ways they had experienced all the vectors of development. The experiences they were reflecting on impacted not only their identity, but their ability to practice advocacy. Through the use of this theoretical framework, I was able to see where participants were and where I could help them develop further as it relates to advocacy. Furthermore, each of the seven vectors, I believe, is an essential piece of advocacy work whether it is developing competence, managing emotions, developing mature interpersonal relationships, or developing purpose. Participants were all in a different vector and this theory helped me know how to plan my cycles and the interventions to best serve students.

Sanford's Challenge and Support

As I looked at Chickering's theory and realized that some participants were working on different vectors, the theme of readiness emerged getting me to Sanford's (1962) theory of challenge and support. Sanford posited that, "individuals cannot exhibit certain behaviors until they are ready to do so [and that] readiness results either because of the internal processes associated with maturation or beneficial environmental factors" (as cited in Evans et al., 2009, p. 30). I hoped that participants would be able to grow and develop from this study, which is

another reason I chose to incorporate student development theory. However, this was not something I could force on them, which is why understanding the concept of readiness was so important for this study. Knowing how ready participants were, made it easier to plan and act on my observations of the advocacy practices and other data revealed by participants.

The other two elements from this theory are challenge and support. Sanford says that "if the environment presents too much change, students can regress to earlier, less adaptive modes of behavior; solidify current modes of behavior; escape the challenge; or ignore the challenge if escape is impossible" (as cited in Evans et al., 2009, p. 30). Provide too much support and the students' progress stagnates. Challenge them too much, the students will run from the challenges. In terms of my participants, the current climate at USD has been very contentious and I saw it affect them deeply. My perception was that of them falling into this binary of us versus them. For the purpose of this study, I had to challenge them to think and act with an open mind and heart while supporting and validating them in their feelings, thoughts, and hurt as a result of the contentious campus climate. I had to challenge to get to a place of open mindedness because that is something they needed in order to practice advocacy and get others to join them in their cause. Having Sanford's theory in mind was essential to keeping great balance of challenge and support for participants while also assessing their readiness for what was to come next.

Alexander Astin's Theory of Involvement

The third theory that informed my work with participants is Astin's (1984) theory of involvement in which he stated that "Involvement refers to the investment of physical and psychological energy in various objects. The objects may be highly generalized (the student experience) or highly specific (preparing for a chemistry examination)" (Astin, p. 2). Participants in this study were all involved students across campus and I was looking to understand how they

seemed to exert both physical and psychological energy as it relates to advocacy. Furthermore, I was looking for methods and different ways that I or the UFMC staff could create an environment for them to thrive as advocacy practitioners. On top of creating such environment, and why Astin's theory was so important is because I had to make sure that whatever methods I came up with would be conducive for student needs.

Context

My research took place at the USD, which is a small private Catholic institution in San Diego, California. The focus area of the research was in the UFMC, where I work as a graduate assistant. The UFMC was established in 1997 from a couple students voicing a need for space. Also, the UFMC as a center is a place the USD community can come to explore and affirm the identities they hold. As a graduate assistant, my responsibilities include coordinating a variety of programs that serve to educate the campus community and be a platform for students to create a community.

Since my arrival in the UFMC and in the USD community, I noticed that student interaction, engagement, and involvement looked different from other campuses I had visited and seen prior. The campus was very siloed with minimal collaboration between departments, faculty, and administrators. I associated that difference to the fact that USD has its own culture. However, this observation became troubling when some students mentioned in passing that some their needs were not being met. Additionally, the student affairs division at USD in October 2017 had made significant changes that are still reverberating across campus and many students expressed dismay at the fact that their voices had not been a part of these changes. Due to these changes in the student affairs division, the resources within the UFMC were affected as some

individuals were transferred to different spaces. Ultimately, this brought the need to assess the student voice at USD.

I came from a campus culture where students, particularly ethnic minority students, were active in advocating for their needs and they had a passion for it. As such, the lack of similar passion for advocacy by students at USD was very surprising. As someone who is passionate about the student's voice, I believe the student-centered model that many universities proclaim should always start with the student voice and self-advocacy efforts by students. Beyond that, through the student-centered model practitioners should be active in creating a platform for students to grow as advocators.

Furthermore, USD is a predominantly white institution (PWI) and that alone creates tension among students, especially students of color, and may affect their ability to practice advocacy. While my previous campus, Colorado State University, was also a PWI it was not the same. During my time at Colorado State, I felt like students had more agency and there was not as much tension, especially racial tension. As Harper and Hurtado (2007) stated, "researchers have consistently found that racial/ethnic minority students and their white peers who attend the same institution often view the campus racial climate in different ways" (p. 12). As a black male on campus, I noticed some divide among students. On the fourth floor where the UFMC is located, some of the students of color would make remarks about how they were unable to connect with their white peers because they did not visit the center unless it was to print. While there was tension because of white students showed up in the space, much of the tension was raised by the students racial and ethnic background. I also felt this tension because I am a black student on this campus and as I have walked across campus and have seen the divide as much as I have felt them.

Beyond just seeing this among peers and the students I have worked with, this tension also existed between my staff at the UFMC. Since I started in the role as a graduate assistant, I have been the only black male staff member. The majority of the staff is all women and my supervisor was a white woman. I did not notice it at first, but it still impacted my ability to work and advocate for my own needs, let alone those of others. While I was conscious of the privileges I hold, my marginalized identities had a bigger effect on me. After months of struggling with the tension, I was finally able to gain some comfort and was motivated to help students who have put their trust in me do the same. I thought that not only was it important for me as a man of color to be heard, it was critical that the student leaders, many of whom are of color, I work with be heard and feel like they mattered at this PWI.

Due to the nature of my research topic and the participants I hoped to be working with, there was potential that privilege would be a theme that plays an important role throughout this action research project. Also, I believe my own understanding of action research could have created an unforeseen limitation as I may have a skewed perception of the privilege I hold. The concept of privilege could lead to the perception of the savior complex. Carrigan (2017), while quoting Flaherty (2016) said, "the prototypical savior is a person who has been raised in privilege and taught implicitly or explicitly (or both) that they possess the answers and skills needed to rescue others, no matter the situation" (p. 8). As part of my action research project I did recognize the fact that everyone participating in the research comes with agency of their own. This hopefully helped me keep any perceptions of the savior complex from emerging. The identities I hold come with privilege and may affect how much the students I work with reveal to me as well as how they participated in my research.

Methodology

Research is a means to seeking and creating knowledge done through various types of research such as action research. Within different types of research, the researcher has different methodologies, from which they can generate knowledge and understanding. In my study, I used O'Leary's (2004) cycles of research. I chose this methodology in part due to its reflection component within the cycles because I believe that research should be based and rooted in a practice that is both reflective and strides toward change making. Additionally, I chose this method because as O'Leary (2004) stated, "cycles converge towards better situation understanding and improved action implementation; and are based in evaluative practice that alters between action and critical reflection" (p. 8).

Using O'Leary's (2004) action research method allowed me to grow in my ability to reflect and in a meaningful and purposeful way; and be better able to implement actions and interventions that are impactful and influential for the student population that I collaborated with during this research project. Also, this methodology gave me the means and tools to which I could negotiate how this research could, with my collaborators, create knowledge and understanding.

Throughout this action research project, I was completely open and transparent with my participants to further authentic engagement from them and create a safe and trusting environment. If the participants would have seen that I was withholding information from them I could have lost their trust and they may have stopped participating. As such, I believe my participants needed to know what my research encompasses and what will happen with the results. This included keeping all audio and written files in a location accessible only to me and letting the participants know how to access the results.

In addition to being open and transparent with my participants, I relied on my critical friends group, faculty advisor, supervisor, and the Student Affairs and SOLES Collaborative (SASC) cohort to challenge, support, and inform me throughout my process. I work in the same area as my critical friends group and SASC cohort, which means we were able to help each other with the development, reflection, elaborating on difficult course concepts, and the completion of our projects. Furthermore, I held two validation groups throughout the process. The validation groups were with the same group of people, my critical friends group, faculty advisor, supervisor, and SASC cohort. From them I elicited feedback to help me understand the areas of strength and weakness in my research and how to address the areas of weakness. The first validation group took place between Cycle 2 and 3 while the last validation group took place in the middle of Cycle 4 where I was shaken up mentally and physically. In having those two validation groups, I was able to get plenty of helpful feedback on analyzing and understanding the data I had gathered.

Participants

In thinking about the intended impact of my research, I wanted to have participants from various backgrounds in pursuit of more equal representation. Also, I wanted my participants to come from diverse experiences and involvement in and around campus to see how student advocacy and voice shows up in different spaces for the students. I had a total of eight participants in this study and all of them identified as people of color. I had two males and six females. One was a first-year student, two second-year students, four third-year students, and one fourth-year student. Each of the participants had some sort of affiliation with the UFMC whether it was through a multicultural student organization or having worked in the commons.

During recruitment, I used two methods to allow me to reach a greater number of students. The first method was email. The use of email was especially useful because my email address was already familiar to many of the individuals and student groups from which I was recruiting. The familiarity I had built by working with the students on other projects and showing up to support them, I feel like made them more willing to participate in my research. Also, I made sure to let the students know that this research was going to be a continuation of some of the work I had done with them and something that will go towards improving their experiences on campus. I made sure to do that in the email and other forms of communication.

The second recruiting method was one-on-one interactions with the students. I approached them whenever they were visiting the UFMC whether it was to study or attend an event. I also went in person to student organization meetings because while many knew me through email, some students did not know what I looked like. So, asking them for their participation in person made me more personable and allowed me to directly answer their questions. I found that going and personally talking to the students made a significant difference. Had I not done that I feel like my participant pool would not have been as diverse.

Cycle 1: Mind Mapping Activity

After I had a good number of participants, which came to be eight, I scheduled a meeting at a time they could all attend and I asked them to participate in a mind mapping activity followed by a debriefing (see Appendix A). The purpose of the mind mapping activity in the first cycle was so that I could understand how the students understood advocacy and its connection to student voice. Furthermore, it was imperative for grasping how the students were defining advocacy. As they were participating in the activity, I asked them to write on a whiteboard the words they used to describe student advocacy. It was incredible because many of the words they

used came with an air of what I thought to be positivity. The words they had included were: expression, action, courage, unity, powerful, influential, and strong to name a few. They chose those words because of how each of them intertwines with the essence of advocacy. One of the participants said:

> Like I feel like they all kind of touch on it. Yeah. Each of them kind of like capture part of it, like not fully the idea of the word in its entirety, but each of them kind of like are connected to it.

While their words did not fully define the word, they understood and were able to capture what it means to practice advocacy. They seemed to recognize the importance of it and the way it contributes to leadership and change which I thought was crucial especially since we are on a campus that espouses change-making as a value. Though they able were to see the positive attributes of advocacy and being able to use their voice as students, they were also able to see that the practice of advocacy is not easy. Some of the words they used to illustrate that it can sometimes be difficult were: unheard, underestimated, and limited. Seeing them bring up those words was illuminating as it showed me which areas I could focus on with them.

Beyond that, however, through their experiences they were able to make connections between their advocacy and their daily lives as student leaders. As they were drawing out those connections, another student said that "student voice is almost always advocating for something." As student leaders seeking change at the university for their peers and themselves, their voice has to always be in full effect and louder than most. For them, advocacy and the concept of student voice were a driving force. Coming to this understanding in this first cycle, served as a springboard to Cycle 2 where I sought to see how they were applying their definitions of advocacy.

Cycle 2: Journaling

During Cycle 2, I asked my participants to keep a journal of their experiences. After Cycle 1 where the participants gave their definitions of advocacy, I wanted to see how they were putting into practice those definitions of advocacy. The journals were also an opportunity for the participants to observe how their peers practice advocacy and use their voices as student leaders. Furthermore, the journals are especially important because they encouraged self-reflection as I was asking my participants to think critically about what student voice means to them and how they perceive it at USD. Additionally, the journaling encouraged more authentic engagement and was a way for me to hear what was going on in areas outside of my reach on campus.

In the journals, the students said a lot about their experiences on campus which was very critical given all that has happened within the last two years. When the division of student affairs embarked on a reorganization, the changes tested the student's ability to practice advocacy. One student wrote that

> I can't help but stop to think about how far we have come and how it could not have been possible the support of other student organizations such as the Black Student Union, MEChA, and others such as the United Front Multicultural Center and USD Media for helping us get our word out.

This reflection showed that the students are thinking deeply and critically about their ability to practice advocacy on a predominantly white campus especially when they are students of color. They recognize the importance of coalition building as a form of advocacy and the strength of a collective.

Beyond that, the students were thinking beyond just building a coalition and getting their peers to support them. Another student said that "a theme of how students at USD practice

advocacy is shaped by pushing the boundaries of what USD normally does, holding the

administration accountable even though it is not the student's responsibility." The student's

primary role on a college campus is getting an education and graduate. However, campus events

always impact their journey to graduation and often meaning they have to be activated and take

action. They have to challenge boundaries that have been put in front of them and hold those

boundaries because that is how they can make change happen.

<p align="center">**Cycle 3: One-on-One Interviews**</p>

For Cycle 3, I relied on one-on-one interviews (see Appendix B) with students to probe

them more deeply on their practice of advocacy and what role I can take up in that. Each

interview was scheduled for thirty minutes. In the interviews, I really wanted to follow up with

the students on what they had provided during the first two cycles and how they felt about mine

and the UFMC's role in helping them with their advocacy. It was especially important to shape

this cycle as a follow up of previous cycles because it allowed me to further explore themes that

had emerged. One such theme was coalition building and with Cycle 3 I was able to glean into

how I and the UFMC could be a part of this coalition building with the students. Furthermore, I

looked to get ideas for what the students would have us do. I, of course, had my own ideas but to

push the theme of coalition building and community forward, getting the student's ideas were

very crucial.

During the interviews, the students spoke a lot on the programming that we have done in

the UFMC and how this has helped them in their application of advocacy. Two particular

programs that they spoke about were *Collective Conversations* and *Speak on It*. Both are

programs I have directly been working on. In the eyes of the students, these programs were a

platform for new voices to be heard because the topics that were covered were something that

was yet to be covered at USD. For example, some of the topics covered were Invisible and Visible Disabilities – How can we create a more inclusive campus/world, Diversity and Inclusion in the Greek Community at USD, and the Renaming Serra Hall. Furthermore, through those programs, the students were able to interact with people they would not normally see. One student talked about how they "opened the door to get students in contact with campus partners." They used these programs to continue building a coalition and bringing others to their cause.

Beyond that, the idea of taking action was something that also emerged. Through programs like *Collective Conversations* and *Speak on It*, the students have been able to reflect on their experiences but have not truly mobilized them. The action component is needed to make a change and the students feel like that is lacking and this opened up room for improvement. Through the programs that we hold, we are able to open up the dialogue and get new voices involved but the issue of what comes next still remains. The students need our support to be successful advocates and in the third cycle the students and I were able to start formulating ways to go about taking action which was something they felt was missing.

Cycle 4: Focus Group

During Cycle 4, I held an hour focus group (see Appendix C), which was an open conversation with some guiding questions. Unfortunately, I did not get all the participants to attend as only four showed up, which is not a great number for a focus group. Cycle 4 took place at around the same time that participants were taking their midterms as it was in the middle of the semester. At the same time participants and their peers were being touched by issues taking place across the globe in Venezuela and New Zealand alike. As such, I had some trouble getting all participants together for the focus group. However, once I was able to get participants in one place, we were able to have conversations from looking at the institution as whole, to the UFMC

to their ideas on how I and UFMC could support them more in their practices. Though I had to reschedule the focus group multiple times, it did bring out ideas about priorities and what students' value at given times. Responding to the events happening across the world took priority because it was impacting their lives here on campus and was part of creating the contentious and divisive feeling in the USD environment.

In reflecting, I thought that responding to events from across the world and showing unity for peers that were impacted the most was an essential part of them building coalitions. In fact, part of why participants chose to be advocates and use their powerful voices to make change was because they had not seen themselves represented. Furthermore, they had noticed issues of inclusivity and people not showing up for them. Overall, I thought this was an area of improvement and something that helped me to answer my research question as far as what I can do to help students to become more comfortable with advocacy.

Out of Cycle 4, immerged the theme of power and institutional influence. While the campus climate acted as a microcosm of the world, the UFMC as a structure, was and is a microcosm of the institution. In talking about where the UFMC stood in the scope of the university, they would say things such as "the UFMC is an extension of the university structure" and the UFMC is expected to follow guidelines but as a concept it's great." The idea that the UFMC and its staff had to act in accordance with university first did not sit well with participants and was something they wished would change. The structure of the university took a lot of power from them. They talked about how if students wanted to hold a protest or something of that nature on campus, they needed approval from administrators and that took away the point of protesting for them. The notion of protesting I thought to be another way in which they show unity and practice advocacy.

Findings

Findings suggest that the students are aware and have a high-level of understanding when it comes to advocacy. On top of that, they had many forms in which they practiced that advocacy whether that's through student organizations or taking up space across campus. They understood the power their voices possess and all that they could accomplish as far as impacting campus goes. Despite their awareness and different forms of advocacy, they still need more assistance in implementing ideas related to advocacy. The findings also indicate that they need staff members and offices such as the UFMC walking beside them as they seek to make a change with advocacy. Along with the need for staff member support, came the realization and understanding of the different areas in which the UFMC and its team have fallen short of supporting the students with advocacy. Participants indicated that despite all that has been done in the UFMC, there was still no action being taken by the staff or through programming to address issues related to student advocacy. While the majority of the participants felt that the UFMC needed to do more as far as taking action, one participant did contradict this during Cycle 3 where he reflected on his student organizations success due in part because of UFMC support.

Furthermore, while they knew and understood different forms of practicing advocacy, they needed someone to challenge and encourage them to actually put into practice those other forms. Their responses indicated that often they were too quick to act on issues and needed to take the time to think critically. This was clearly evident when they referred to a protest organized by a new organization on campus called ANSWER. At times, the students acted rashly and in anger that they forgot to bring peers with them. This was an area and time they need professionals to enact student development theories such as Sanford Challenge and Support, so that they could channel that anger properly and actually produce results that they needed.

UFMC Programming

During the research, I spent a lot of time and attention to hearing and understanding my participant's perceptions of what the UFMC can do with programming and incorporating advocacy. This was especially important because a significant portion of my job is around programming. My participants spoke a great deal on the monthly dialogue series, *Speak on It*, that I coordinate. From my observations, I saw that my participants and other students appreciate what the dialogue series stands for and how it involves the campus. They shared with me the fact that the dialogue series was great for starting a dialogue and creating room for reflection. Though this did raise the issue of bias due to the rapport I have built with them, it did match feedback previously received from attendees of the *Speak on It* program.

The focus on programming was especially evident during Cycle 3 where I specifically asked questions around how I and the UFMC have done in promoting advocacy. When those questions came, they lamented on the fact that our programs incorporated elements of advocacy, but nothing came out of it. Another program that my participants talked about is *Collective Conversations* which looked to tackle the ways in which we were lacking around the topic of advocacy, and no programming is happening. They expressed a lot of frustration about that while at the same time appreciating the other programs and what they have accomplished. They liked the fact that *Collective Conversations* for the fact that it was run primarily by student interns, which meant that the student voice and experience was somewhat being heard. While *Speak on It* and our other programs are student-centered, the students are not as heavily involved in creating them and my participants wanted for more to be done in collaboration with them.

Staff Members

The issue of staff and administrative support was very apparent during my research. The students know how to practice advocacy, but they understand the fact that they need support to make change happen. They know that their voices can only reach so far when they are acting on their own. While they have many ideas, they often need support in implementing them and making sure that they are reaching the right people. Campus partnerships were important for them and they need the UFMC staff specially to help them get in contact with the key partners. Though they had a strong desire for the staff members to walk beside them and speak up for them, they understood that the staff play a different role and that they can't always show up for them. One participant drew the following picture to show how advocacy should be practiced making sure that their voices are reaching the right people and places.
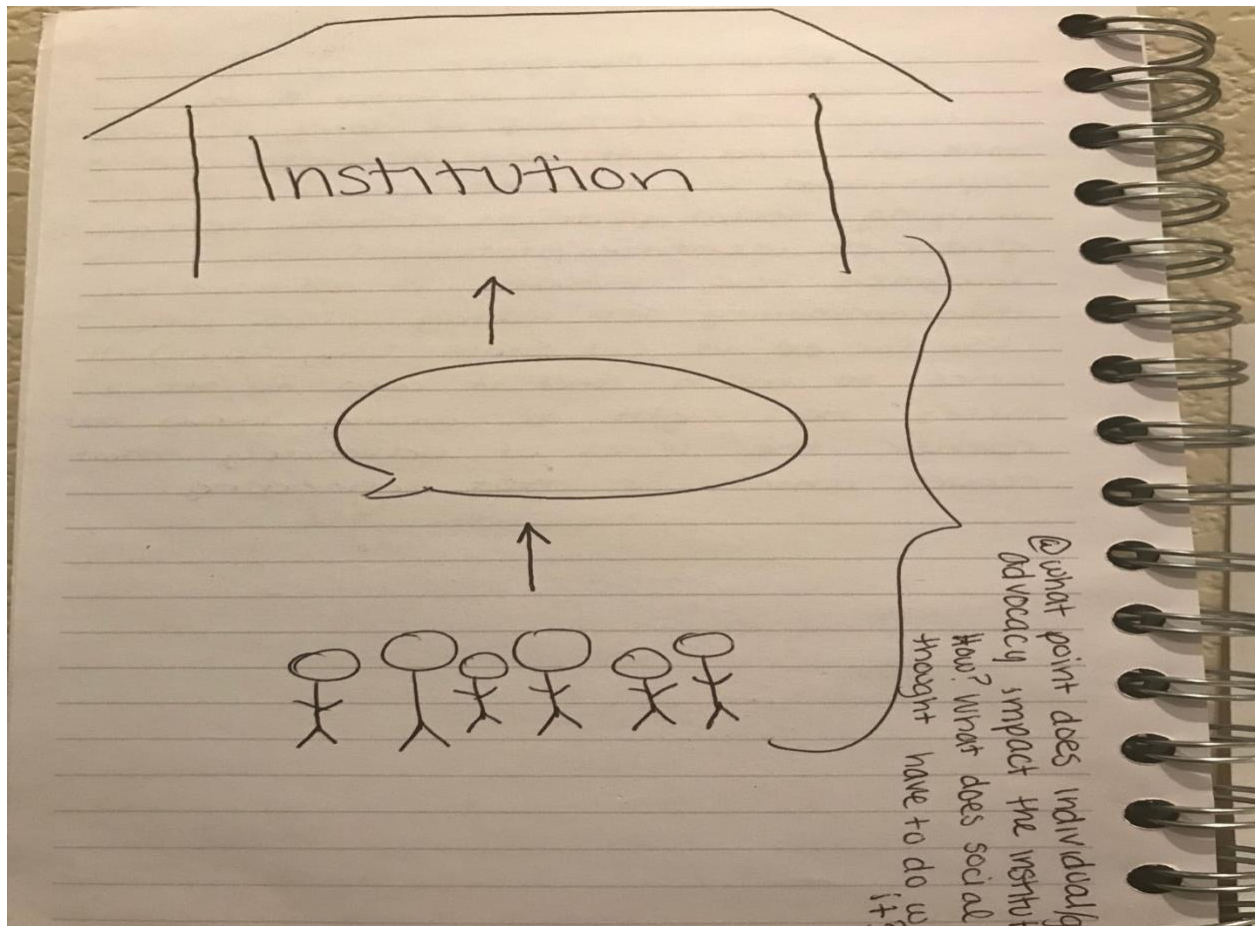
Figure 1. Student drawing regarding the practice of advocacy.

Personal Learning

After working in the UFMC these past two years, I feel that I now better understand how I can better serve the students I work with, especially those of color. With the action research project completed, I have a better understanding of how to apply research methodology and student development theory. Also, I realized how overwhelming doing this work can be especially when hearing about the students struggles all across campus. As a professional who sees these students every day, I carry the struggles and trauma they share me just as much as they do. While on a PWI, the students I work with face and experience so much hurt that it is often left with us in the UFMC. Due to how carrying some the emotional and psychological feelings of the students became so overwhelming, the study reminded me of how important it is to take care of the mind and body.

Through the research and working in the UFMC, I learned the importance of taking the time to truly listen and try to understand student needs. In addition to that, I learned that as professionals we need to create spaces that are safe and encourage bravery for students to share their stories and build coalitions with peers. Furthermore, this research reminded me of the reason I chose to go into student affairs. As I advocate for students and their needs, it is important to involve them and make sure their voices are included at the table. Participants shared a lot about their experiences in the study and how the UFMC and I can continue to support them. It is important to be intentional about how we involve them and how we show up for them.

Recommendations

Community Care

Based on the time I spent talking to various students and my participants and conferences I attended, I learned that the practice of advocacy is not easy. I learned that while it is hard for the students, it is also difficult for the higher education professionals working with the students every day. The students come to us with everything that they are facing and have to support them which is where my recommendations begin. First, we have to take a look and reimagine how we are taking up self-care. The concept of community care should go hand in hand with how self-care is practiced. Community care is defined as "a shared responsibility to attend to the needs of the people within a group, centered in trust and reciprocity" (Sambile, 2018, p. 35). We have a shared responsibility to care for one another because that is how we get students to develop and avoid burning out. When we work with the students every day hearing about their struggles and caring for them, that impacts us just as much and many professionals forget to take care of themselves as well. By taking better care of ourselves, we will be better able to support them especially now that they are wishing for us to walk with them as they fight to make impactful changes on campus. Part of changing how the practitioner's practice self-care is about being a part of programs such as the UFMC's *Breather Series*. By participating in the *Breather Series*, we can take better care of ourselves while with the students. *Breather Series* usually consist of activities such as painting and coloring that helps with relaxing.

Revisit the UFMC Mission and Purpose with Students

While participants know that the UFMC and its staff are a resource that is there for them, their development, and through their progression as students of USD; they were not quite aware of the UFMC mission. This was clearly evident in the fact that taking-action kept emerging as a

theme throughout the study. As such I suggest that the UFMC take steps to inform students, especially those that rely on the UFMC resources, of its mission and purpose as an educational resource that may not align with some of the ways students wish to practice advocacy. By making it a point for students to know and understand the mission and purpose, students will become better to utilize the UFMC especially if they can make their goals match with the mission. If students are not able to fully utilize the resources of the UFMC because their goals do not align with UFMC mission and purpose, it might create tension for the students. As to reach as many students as possible, this can be something done at the start of programs the commons put on or through the newsletter. Once students are aware of the mission and purpose, it will help to reduce the anger and tension they feel when the UFMC as a department and staff do not show up for them how they would like.

Reimagining UFMC programming

Second, I recommend reevaluating the programs currently running in the UFMC. My participants expressed that programs such as *Speak on It* are great for starting conversations and reflecting, but they do not go far enough toward taking-action. Change cannot happen if action is not being taken, so by changing how we do programming, we can incorporate methods in which students are doing more than reflecting. In being intentional about how we put the programs together and make certain they align with student needs, will make our programs and the space more purposeful. Also, there has to be a reconsideration of when and where we are having our programs. Most of our programs happen during Torero hours and those hours do not really work for many of the students because there is too many programs taking place at the same time. With change when and where our programs are taking place, we may be able to reach more students

than we do now. Who we can reach with our programs is essential because many of the student leaders are using these programs to create coalitions and find allies.

Another part to this recommendation is reducing the number of programs and events that the UFMC puts on. While all the programs have a purpose and fit into the mission of the commons, having too many programs can also be a detriment. Through the reduction of events and programs, the UFMC and its graduate assistants can have just a few that they are putting all their strength into running. In doing so, the few events and programs being run would be much stronger and would create the opportunity to dive deeper into unpacking the topics the UFMC often cover. Furthermore, the graduate assistants who run those programs would have more time in which they could spend working with students to make sure their needs are being met. Not only would the graduate assistants have the opportunity to be more student facing, the other stuff would as well because no one would have to be running back and forth between events.

The United Front Leadership Council

The United Front Leadership Council (UFLC) is comprised of students from the many student organizations present on campus and are supposed to provide some guidance and student perspective on how the UFMC can achieve and implement its mission. However, some participants in my study felt the UFLC as a program has not been meeting its mission. They thought that the way the UFLC is currently structured is not very efficient. To make it something that the students can be more invested in, I suggest reorganizing its structure and making it more workshop orientated. Having it take a workshop style would be great because it would make the work feel more tangible. Furthermore, the UFLC needs a change in the topics covered as students feel like they are inefficient and do not help with practicing advocacy. Some potential topics that could go with this change in structure include advocacy 101 or how do you make

change on a change making campus. All those were topics suggested by participants and that I agree need to happen. The students have many ideas, things they want to advocate and fight for, as well as change they want to see. The UFCL is platform that could help them learn different methods and lead them toward a direction in which they can become comfortable and better advocates. However, that will not happen if the UFLC stays as it is currently.

Leverage Graduate Assistant Positions

In what I thought was the most interesting finding, students found graduate assistants to be a privileged position as they had more access to decision making administrators. On top of that, students have found it easier to speak with the graduate assistants than with administrators such as the director of the UFMC and Assistant Vice President (AVP) for student affairs. The graduate assistants are in a position where they could do so much especially in relation to advocacy as they are sometimes the first individuals that students go to. They have the opportunity to act as the buffer between administrators especially since they are more student facing. Their needs to be more opportunities for them to work more with the students and be given more agency to voice the students' needs. This can be done by giving graduate assistants, especially the graduate assistants in the Student Affairs SOLES Collaborative (SASC), more chances to sit in meetings with administrators. When participants brought up the positionality, I noticed that they were not just referring to me but also the other graduate assistants they work with in their other involvements across campus. That is why this recommendation encompassed SASC as well as the UFMC.

Increase Campus Collaborations

Throughout the study, there was mention of how the UFMC and the commons on the fourth floor are siloed. Participants talked about how ever since the student affairs

reorganization, they just placed all the departments doing diversity and inclusion work in one place and nothing has really come out of it because all the programs were reflection and discussion. As such, I suggest that the UFMC do more collaboration with other departments across campus and explore having some programs outside the fourth place. Of course, the collaborations have to be intentional and be able to challenge students to think differently and explore how their identities are intersectional. Furthermore, they need to be able to get the students to understand that it is through those intentional programs that they can build coalitions to have their messages reach a diverse population. The collaboration also has to encompass new and different organizations that have not previously been involved with the UFMC. Some of the departments that the UFMC needs to have more or new partnerships with include but are not limited to the Tribal Liaison, Graduate and Law Commons, African Student Union, Fraternity and Sorority Life, and Associated Students which helps fund UFMC programs. Through making efforts to have those intentional collaborations, it will make the space less siloed and make departmental relationships less transactional on top of helping students gain supporters.

<div align="center">

Limitations

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Throughout my action research there were several limitations. In the study, I was especially focused on what the UFMC and myself could do to assist students to become more comfortable with advocacy. That became a limitation for me because of the effort that was put into doing collaborative work with the Women's' Commons, Black Student Resource Commons, and the newly created LGBTQ+ and Allies Commons. As a result of the collaborative effort that was being made, participants often referred to that collaborative instead of just the UFMC. Since I was fixated on the UFMC as it was my immediate space, I did not quite expand the scope of the study to include the other commons.

Halfway through the year, I noticed that the UFMC began taking on similar work to my study. Although, the approach they took was different from mine and the focus was mostly on coalition building where as I was also trying to understand how participants understood advocacy work. Also, I had the extra component of looking at myself and my ability to assist students as they sought to practice advocacy. Though the work we were doing was the same, we did not share the data that was being gathered. As such, there was no effort made to work together and looking back, the data my participants shared with me was also getting to the UFMC or the director who was leading the efforts of the UFMC. Some of the participants in my study were part of the efforts the director was making because they showed up to the United Front Leadership Council where a lot of those efforts were made. I feel like this was a limitation because my research could have become stronger had I made more of an effort to be a part of the efforts the director/UFMC was making with students.

Another limitation I saw, came through my relationship with participants and the bias that was potentially created. Through our interactions, participants and I had built great rapport and trust. That was the reason they participated in my study. However, because of the rapport there is high potential that they told me what I wanted to hear and giving me biased feedback. Furthermore, I asked participants to be candid with me just as I was being candid with them; and that potentially blinded me to any bias. In addition to that, the trust I have placed in my students potentially further blinded me and added more bias to the study. However, I trust that my relationship with them allowed them the chance to tell me things they would not have otherwise said.

Beyond that, when I went into the summer my position in the UFMC was on shaky grounds and I was fearful about that. The prospects of losing my job created a lot of anxiety for

me which was a hindrance and a limitation at times. It truly affected how operated and how I approached my study upon my return to the UFCM in the fall. Furthermore, as a result I feel like I sought approval more than ever and I was constantly in my head. This created another limitation in time constraints. I felt like I needed my study to be perfect that I kept going back and wanting to constantly make changes. It did not help that my supervisors wanted to take a look at my material and provide feedback. Despite those limitations, I hoped that through the different methods I employed, students would be able to voice potential needs and they did.

Conclusion

Overall, this study was a great learning opportunity and culmination of my two years here at USD. At times it was overwhelming, but every morning I woke up excited to go to work and class. To all my participants and critical friends group, thank you so much for being in a community with me and helping me find purpose in the everyday life at USD.

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Appendix A

Mind Mapping Activity Script

Hello! I would like to welcome and thank you all for being here today. The purpose for this activity is to gather data and research how student's perception and understanding of student voice in relation to advocacy. There are consent forms in front of you, please take a moment to review them. Please let me know if you have any questions.

We will be doing a mind map and quick reflection today. As I said earlier, the purpose of this exercise is to help me research you as students perceive and understand student voice. This exercise will take no more than 30 minutes during this time I would like to ask you not to use your cellphones.

Here I have box of markers for you to write with. In a few moments I will write the phrase student voice on the board, after I write the phrase word please write what comes to mind on the board and draw lines to connect it back to the phase. This is a silent activity and you will have 10 minutes to complete this activity.

Potential Discussion & Reflection Questions:
- How did it feel doing this silent activity?
- What came to your mind as you were doing the activity?
- Why did you write the words you wrote?
- What did you observe from the group during the activity?
- What did you think of the activity?

Appendix B

Interview Guide

Thank you for taking the time to meet with me. The purpose of this interview is for me to collect data on the relationship between students and the UFMC and research the impact of the UFMC on student's voice and advocacy work for student leaders here at USD. Please also let me know if you have any questions at this time.

Please note that all of your responses are anonymous and that this interview is being recorded. Let's begin:

- How often did you visit the United Front Multicultural Commons (UFMC) last year?
- How would you describe your visits to the UFMC?
- What feelings did you associate with your visits?
- What words come to mind when you hear the term student voice/advocacy?
- How do you feel the UFMC does in promoting the student's voice?
- How do you feel I've promoted advocacy in my role at the UFMC?
- What are some ways that I can better improve advocacy in my role at the UFMC?

Appendix C

Focus Group Script

Hello! I would like to welcome and thank you all for being here today. The purpose for this focus group is for me to collect data and research the role of the UFMC staff, myself included have and can play in furthering student voice work here at USD and help students better be able to advocate for their needs. This focus group is discussion based and will go for an hour with a fifteen minutes break in between. This is a chance for you to say whatever is on your mind, but I do have some questions to help guide the discussion.

Focus Group Questions:
- What factors have influenced your perception of advocacy?
- How confident are you in my ability to help you use your voice as a student to be a better advocate?
- How confident are you in the UFMC's ability to help you be a better advocate?
- What are ways that can encourage you to exercise your student voice or advocacy?
- What are some of things that discourage you from exercising your student voice or advocacy?

Appendix D

Email Solicitation & Onsite Announcement

Hello,

My name is Martel, and I am a graduate student in the Higher Education Leadership program and I am also a graduate assistant in the United Front Multicultural Commons (UFMC). I am looking for participants for my Action Research Project. The purpose of my study is to examine the ways in which the UFMC promotes student advocacy and explore the ways in which I can help students improve their advocacy in my role at the UFMC.

If you decide to participate in this study you will be asked to participate in a couple of exercises that will include a mind mapping activity, one on one interviews, journaling, and a focus group exploring how students at USD have been engaging in student advocacy work. Your participation in this study will be sixty minutes for the focus group, thirty minutes for a one on one interview, and thirty minutes for the mind mapping activity. You will also be asked to keep a journal in which you can write in at you own time. Your total participation time will take a minimum of three hours to four hours for the entirety of the study. You will be audiotaped during the focus group, interview, and mind mapping activity.

I appreciate you taking the time to read this/listening to me and helping me with my research.

If you have any questions please feel free to email me at mserwenda@sandiego.edu.

Kind Regards,
Martel Serwenda

Appendix E

Consent Form

University of San Diego
Institutional Review Board

Research Participant Consent Form

For the research study entitled: *Improving the Practice of Advocacy Among Student Leaders at USD*

I. Purpose of the research study
Martel Serwenda is a student in the School of Leadership and Education Science at the University of San Diego. You are invited to participate in a research study he/she is conducting. The purpose of this research study is: to improve how I, as a student affairs professional can assist students to become better advocates for their needs.

II. What you will be asked to do
If you decide to be in this study, you will be asked to:

- Participate in a mind mapping activity
- Participate in a private interview about your experiences
- Write in a journal
- Participate in a focus group

You will be audiotaped/videotaped during the interview.

Your participation in this study will take a total of 8 hours minutes.

III. Foreseeable risks or discomforts
This study involves no more risk than the risks you encounter in daily life.

IV. Benefits
While there may be no direct benefit to you from participating in this study, the indirect benefit of participating will be knowing that you helped researchers better understand student voice work.

V. Confidentiality
Any information provided and/or identifying records will remain confidential and kept in a locked file and/or password-protected computer file in the researcher's office for a minimum of five years. All data collected from you will be coded with a number or pseudonym (fake name). Your real name will not be used. The results of this research project may be made public and information quoted in professional journals and meetings, but information from this study will only be reported as a group, and not individually.

VI. Compensation
You will receive no compensation for your participation in the study.
VII. Voluntary Nature of this Research
Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You do not have to do this, and you can refuse to answer any question or quit at any time. Deciding not to participate or not answering any of the questions will have no effect on any benefits you're entitled to, like your health care, or your employment or grades. **You can withdraw from this study at any time without penalty.**

VIII. Contact Information
If you have any questions about this research, you may contact either:

1) Martel Serwenda
Email: Mserwenda@sandiego.edu
Phone: (720) 629-5032

2) Cheryl Getz
Email: cgetz@sandiego.edu
Phone: (619) 260-4289

I have read and understand this form, and consent to the research it describes to me. I have received a copy of this consent form for my records.

_____

Signature of Participant   Date

_____

Name of Participant (**Printed**)

_____

Signature of Investigator   Date