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Connecting First-Generation Students to Leadership Opportunities

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the impact that current outreach methods utilized by the Associated Students of UC San Diego are having on first-generation students' engagement and pursuit of leadership opportunities, and ways that the department of Associated Students can adapt their approaches to better encourage participation from this student group. My research question was: How can I create outreach efforts that increase the number of first-generation students seeking student leadership roles? This research led to an enhanced understanding of how the department can connect members of this student group to open roles and opportunities for student leadership within AS UC San Diego, and increase first-generation representation within the department through new recruitment and retention practices. Findings indicated that the importance of first-generation students' extracurricular learning through student leadership experiences would be served by implementing these recommendations and strengthening the department's ability to connect with this group of students.

Connecting First-Generation Students to Leadership Opportunities

I have the tremendous opportunity to work with student leaders every day in my role at UC San Diego. I get a chance to support students who have become part of student government either by winning an election or being appointed to their position. The needs and challenges students experience while navigating their undergraduate experience are subtly different when they are in roles of leadership, in part because they are simultaneously exposed to pressures of setting an example for their fellow students, and depended upon by administrators and staff to provide input on behalf of their peers. As a former student leader, my ability to provide support and guidance to students in these positions is powerful to me. These students are often strengthening their personal leadership skills and developing a stronger understanding of civic engagement while simultaneously improving the campus and moving student-centered issues and causes forward.

Supporting first-generation students is also a personal passion for me. As a first-generation student myself, my own experiences with navigating the undergraduate experience inform how I interact and work with students today. I highly value the act of bringing new perspectives and diverse voices and experiences into Student Leadership positions because I know that when I became a student leader, I felt like I had a unique perspective to offer. Being first-generation brought many challenges, but I found it to ultimately be an empowering identity that enabled me to think differently and serve the student body in a unique way.

However, my initial foray into student leadership did not come about due to a strategic outreach effort. Rather, a personal recommendation from a friend about an open position is what put this opportunity on my radar as a freshman. Based on this personal experience and anecdotal

stories shared by other first-gen peers, I learned this was typically how students became student leaders within UC San Diego's student government. My concern here was that patterns like this can create an overly insular environment. In my role, I recognized the need for intentional efforts to connect first-generation students with student leadership positions at Associated Students of UC San Diego, and a lack of assessment of current outreach methods used by the department, with no measure of the impact on students who are first-generation.

The first-generation population at UCSD continues to grow. This is happening on campuses nationwide, but is occurring within the UC System at an even higher rate (UC Office of the President, 2017). As the campus continually becomes more accessible to first-generation students, it's important for the department of Associated Students (AS) to become more accessible to them as well. My hope for this research was that the findings of this study would enable AS UC San Diego to engage more effectively with first-generation students in the future, and recruit first-generation students to apply to leadership positions and get involved at a higher rate than they have been in the past. The central question that has guided this research was: How can I create outreach efforts that increase the number of first-generation students seeking student leadership roles?

Literature Review

First-generation students are currently a fast-growing population within higher education, and as efforts to expand college access continue, there is a strong likelihood that this trend will continue into the future. Prior research indicates this student group has needs that are unique, and as time goes on, it is becoming more important for higher education systems to adapt their practices in order to better meet those needs (Marginson, 2016). The dynamics of the student

body at UCSD in particular are changing, and it is crucial that these changes be recognized and addressed in order to create a UC that is more supportive and empowering for first-generation students. These are the values that are driving my research.

As a first-generation student myself, I recognize that one of the challenges of serving and supporting a group which is less visible is that their unique needs can tend to go unaddressed. (Chau, 2018). Much of the current outreach to undergraduate students about student leadership and involvement opportunities within AS UC San Diego is based on tabling at traditional campus events such as admit day (Triton Day), orientation programs and Welcome Week service fairs. No current outreach efforts within the department intentionally seek to reach first-generation students, and no assessment of the efficacy of these outreach methods in general is currently being conducted within the department.

Much of the existing research that has been done on first-generation students has focused on factors that influence students' academic preparedness and level of knowledge before attending, their transition experience from postsecondary schools into higher education, and academic persistence factors/retention rates once they have made the transition (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, G., & Terenzini, 2004). Less is known in general about first-generation students' learning and engagement outside of the classroom or the factors that lead them to engage in extracurricular activities.

Studies show that first-generation students tend to engage in campus organizations at a lower rate than their second-generation peers, even though doing so can have a significant positive impact on their success (Pike & Kuh, 2005). First-generation students are also more likely to report personal gains and improvements through extracurricular service-learning

opportunities. (Pelco, Ball & Lockeman, 2014). Campus involvement and student leadership provides students with an opportunity to develop practical leadership skills, which can aid them in their academic pursuits as well as their job prospects upon graduation. Additionally, students are able to establish a stronger relationship to their institution and leave a lasting legacy through involvement, ultimately improving their personal experience of higher education as a whole (Ruiz, 2016).

While it's demonstrably beneficial for first-generation students to be connected to organizational involvement to meet unique needs that they have, it is also important to recognize the unique strengths that first-generation students bring into an educational setting. Recognizing these unique strengths has the potential to improve higher education for everyone. In a study focusing on the experiences of rural Latino first-generation students, one of the most significant themes that emerged was their commitment to serving others and improving lives within their community, through their academic pursuits in the classroom and professional and extracurricular pursuits as well (Flores, 2017). It has also been shown that at least some students whose parents have had no college experience end up taking more ownership for their own goal setting and develop motivations and achievements that are firmly rooted in their own sense of self and personal values. (Hand & Payne, 2008). These are important skills and qualities to possess as a student leader within student government, whether it be through providing student representation on campus committees or advocating for student needs in the campus community.

Context

On the department's website, Associated Students of UC San Diego (AS UCSD) is self-described as a group with the mission "to facilitate and encourage students to grow and

develop through their involvement in student government, its services and auxiliaries. We promote student engagement in all areas of campus life through leadership, advocacy, and service in order to build and strengthen our community." Students can join Associated Students by filing and running in a student body election, or by applying to one of hundreds of positions that open up annually within the Council and its auxiliaries. Associated Students is fully funded by a student-initiated activity fee that provides the group with a certain degree of financial autonomy from the main campus fund, and more decision-making power than, for example, a staff-run department or division. AS UCSD could be (and often is) described as a student-run department of the University that is still bound by its policies and procedures, but with students making the decision on how to allocate resources and steer advocacy efforts. A team of full-time student affairs professionals provide advising services and administrative support for these efforts.

Much of my passion for this project is rooted in my personal experiences as a first-generation undergraduate student who joined AS UCSD. When I enrolled at UC San Diego, I had very little understanding of the skills or behaviors necessary for being a successful college student. My parents didn't have higher education experience themselves, which limited their ability to provide advice to me when I faced challenges adjusting to my new student life - and there were no shortage of challenges. One of the most powerful ways that I found my purpose and passion during my time at UCSD was by joining student government. Upon the recommendation of a friend, I decided to apply for a position in order to find a community on campus and feel more connected to fellow students. My meetings and conversations with the advising staff continually provided me with helpful considerations and important lessons as I

learned and developed as a student leader. Countless skills that I developed from these experiences are still very relevant in my current work. Now that I am working full-time to advise a new generation of student leaders, I am able to serve in many of the ways that I was served. This positionality is profoundly significant for me as a young professional.

However, in my current role as a staff member, I don't often have the opportunity to connect with first-generation students about this aspect of their identity. My informal assessment heading into this project was that there are currently few first-generation students currently filling student leadership roles within Associated Students, even though there are many different ways to get involved. Outreach methods currently utilized by the department to promote student leadership opportunities are often based on what has been done in the past, and no formal assessment is currently done to demonstrate how these outreach methods impact first-gen recruitment. Reflecting on my own experience as an undergraduate student, I was connected to a leadership opportunity by a friend who was already involved herself. None of the department's outreach methods had been effective on me as a first-generation student.

This reflection led me to ponder the ways in which these outreach methods could be studied for their impact on first-generation students. I realized that approaches to promoting student leadership opportunities could be unintentionally crafted in a way that was not landing well with first-generation students. This meant there could potentially be blind spots that were limiting this group of students from accessing those opportunities. In my staff position at UCSD, I represent the department at several key tabling events which enabled me to interact with a large amount of new students. I also sit in on weekly meetings with students who are already engaged

in student leadership. Both of these settings provided me with access to research subjects and data-collecting opportunities.

One challenge I correctly anticipated when working within this context was that first-generation students are not easily identifiable and do not always self-identify. My assumption that few first-generation students are current student leaders was heavily influenced by the fact that a student must choose to share this part of their identity in order for me to learn this about them. Finding creative ways to identify members of this student group or creating environments where students were more willing to self-identify as first-generation students was the primary challenge for this research project, and will likely remain a key challenge of future efforts in this area of research.

Action Research Model

One of the defining characteristics of Action Research is that it places the researcher in a position of closeness to the subjects of their study. As a staff member within the department of Associated Students, and a former first-generation student leader myself, this approach recognizes these experiences as helpful in establishing myself as an insider-observer. This means that my unique lens and personal values were guiding principles that aided me in my pursuit of new knowledge, and that my goal was not to completely remove subjectivity from my approach but to embrace it and recognize its impact on the work.

There are several models under the Action Research umbrella, but the one that I chose to utilize for my project was O'Leary's cycles of research. Under O'Leary's model, action research is formulated in a spiral-shaped gradual learning approach (see Figure 1), which requires

constant reflection and data interpretation in order to refine understanding and actions before moving from one cycle to the next (Koshy, 2010).

Figure 1

O'Leary's Cycles of Research
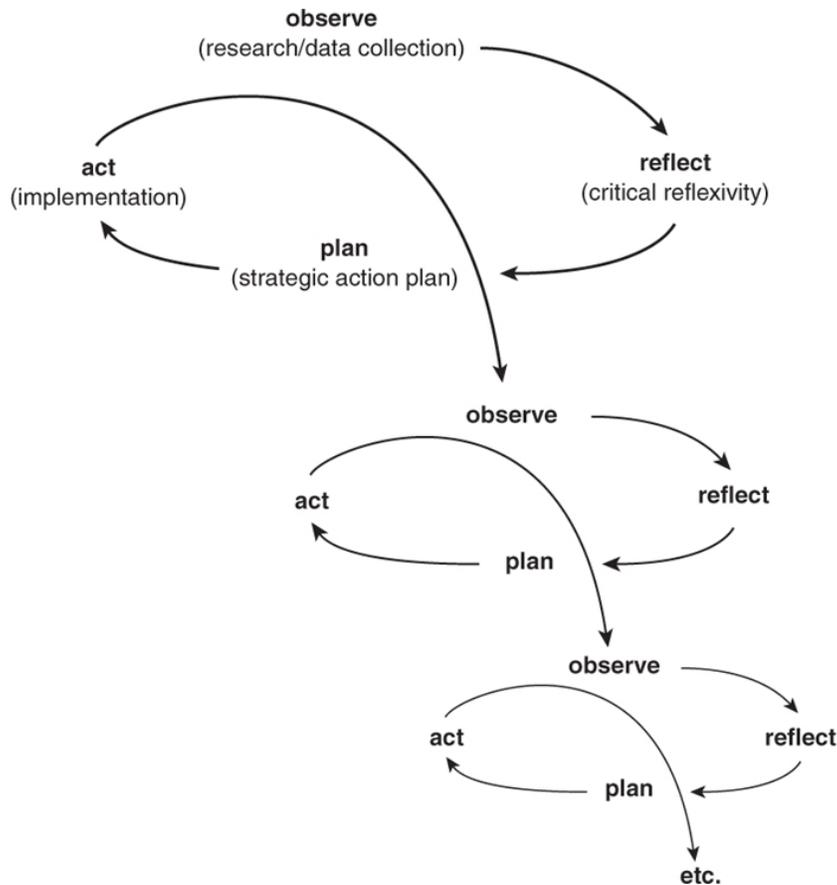
As illustrated, this occurs in four steps per cycle: observe, reflect, plan, act, and then repeat as needed. This approach to research assumes the idea that the research process, its ultimate outcome, and the application of this new knowledge are all linked inextricably. In O'Leary's approach to Action Research, there is an embedded notion that knowledge can be generated and is actionable - meaning that creation of knowledge results in change, and creation of change

results in new knowledge. This cycle continues in a spiral, with continual progression toward a better process or product with each passing cycle.

Ultimately, this approach suited my project very well, as each of my cycles began with observation and data collection and culminated in an action that led to the following cycle. The way that I initially structured my cycles to occur sequentially was intended to enable new knowledge to inform each subsequent cycle. In the middle of each cycle, however, are the intermediary steps of reflection and planning. These portions of each cycle required me to pause, then connect the collected data with my own values, personal experiences, and assumptions before taking any action. Guided by this reflective experience, I was then able to move on to planning the changes I would like to implement carefully and strategically before taking action.

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Cycle 1: Survey

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Description of Cycle

The first approach to data-collection was to identify whether any first-generation students were already interacting with current AS outreach efforts, and if so, how many of these students were learning about student leadership opportunities as a result of these efforts. My position on AS Staff was tasked with attending a series of campus events throughout Summer and early Fall, where we set up a table with flyers and giveaway items that were distributed to newly admitted freshman and transfer students (and their families, in some cases). At each tabling opportunity, I collected a list of students' names and email addresses to receive information about open positions within AS.

Students whose information ended up on this list met a very basic standard for "successful" outreach. Not only were they attending an event where our department's primary

outreach effort was occurring, but they had been willing to approach the AS table and give their contact information to the department. The establishment of this connection ensures that the department will be able to reach them about future openings within the student government or invite them to attend future AS events, which may result in a student's further engagement or involvement as a student leader.

I needed to know whether this basic standard for successful outreach was effective for any first-generation students, and if so, how many. Conversations with students at these tabling events are lighthearted and seek mainly to answer basic questions about Associated Students in hopes that we'll garner interest from potential student leaders. Typically an elevator pitch (a method of marketing where we practice quickly describing the organization in a 45 second elevator ride) is developed and reused for the majority of these interactions. At the end of the elevator pitch, we'll answer any questions and then encourage the student to give us their contact information. The "success" of this effort is defined by whether the student accepts the invitation. All of these outreach efforts occurred in the Summer and Fall quarter of 2019. The survey was then distributed in January 2020. The questions were as follows:

1. What year are you currently?

2. How did you first hear about Associated Students?

3. How likely are you to seek out more information on available student leadership positions, with 1 being not at all likely and 5 being extremely likely?

4. Do you identify as a first-generation college student?

Findings from Survey

In total, 99 students received the survey and 3 responded. See Table 1 for survey responses. All of the students indicated they were first-years (unsurprising given that many outreach efforts are targeted at students who are new to the campus). One student indicated learning about AS at Revelle Plaza (a tabling event location), another through a combination of flyers and events, and the third indicated they had sought out information about AS on their own. Two indicated they were a 4 on the likert scale, and one indicated they were a 5, suggesting that the department's outreach efforts were thought to be very or extremely effective overall. However, of the 3 survey respondents, all of them indicated that they did not identify as a first-generation student.

Table 1

Participant Survey Responses

Questions	Respondent 1	Respondent 2	Respondent 3
What year are you currently?	First Year	First Year	First Year
How did you first hear about Associated Students?	Revelle Plaza	Searching out on my own for UCSD's student gov't	Various flyers and events
How likely are you to seek out more information on available student leadership positions, with 1 being not at all likely and 5 being extremely likely?	4	4	5
Do you identify as a First-Generation college student?	No	No	No

Reflection and Action

  This data was initially disheartening to me on multiple levels - both as a new researcher who had hoped for higher response rates, and as a first-generation student who did not see anyone in the respondent pool share this aspect of my identity. In accordance with O'Leary's action research model, this was my opportunity to pause and reflect on the data I had received, as well as the reaction I was having to it. However, I delayed this process of reflection and focused on other projects and assignments, hoping that eventually I would receive additional survey responses. Looming Action Research deadlines necessitated that I meet with my advisor and identify a path forward with my project, which I did. However, whenever I tried to take further action in pursuit of completing the project, I felt stuck and isolated. In some ways it felt as though the emotions of isolation or lack of visibility I had experienced as a first-gen student were being brought back by the experience of running the survey. Seeing a complete lack of first-gen students in my data at the beginning of my project made me doubt whether I would be able to collect data from any first-gen students at all, and made me nervous to move forward into this uncertainty. I needed the insight of first-generation students but I wasn't reaching them. My AR work ground to a standstill.

  It's also important to acknowledge the fact that in late March of 2020, the United States entered into the beginning of seriously responding to the Covid-19 pandemic. These experiences I have described from my reflections as a new researcher were in no way helped by the sudden removal of nearly all normal routines and interactions that had aided my own graduate work. The preparations and planning for my next cycle was negated by the fact that in-person gatherings were not allowed for the next two weeks, or the remainder of Spring semester, or eventually the

remainder of the calendar year. An in-person gathering for my first-generation focus group would not be possible in the way I had envisioned it.

Taking several months to step away from my project and readjust to these drastic changes was difficult for me, but did provide space for reflection to finally occur. Unable to busy myself with the routines of the world that had suddenly gone routine-less, I had even more time to think critically about my experience of "early failure" as a researcher and eventually to give myself grace in this area. The lack of first-generation respondents to my survey was still data - even if it wasn't the data I had hoped for, I needed to see it as an opportunity for insight. This was an indicator that the in-person tabling outreach events that AS was investing time and energy into were potentially failing to garner interest from first-generation students. There was no data to support that any first-generation students had been "successfully" reached. Rather than being left discouraged that my survey had failed to reach any students from my target population, a perspective shift enabled me to view this as motivation to identify better outreach methods for the department. This in itself was validation that my project was needed.

<div align="center">Cycle 2: Interview Process</div>

Description of Cycle

As previously mentioned, the original intention was for data collection to largely occur in in-person focus groups. As Covid-19 drastically impacted research of this modality, adaptation and adjustment was required. In an effort to reform my research approach to adapt to the constraints of distance learning, data collection for this study was instead conducted via Zoom. My primary concern with this as the researcher was the loss of ability for free-flowing conversation and mingling to occur among participants. My expectation and assumption was that

it may be more uncomfortable or difficult for students to talk freely and openly about their experiences if the interactions were all taking place through a screen. I anticipated that this change might result in less significant or less candid insights than they might have otherwise.

While recruiting participants, various emails were sent out to a wide variety of current AS members. Two AS members, actively enrolled undergraduate students who held leadership positions within the organization, ultimately responded to indicate their interest. Another planning obstacle arose when, due to conflicts in their schedules, a mutual time could not be identified for the three of us to meet. I again was required to adapt the data collection method for Cycle 2. Rather than a focus group, two individual interviews were scheduled. I maintained a curiosity around how this additional change might affect the conversation - would the lack of peer-to-peer engagement make participants less comfortable with sharing their experiences, or more comfortable? Would my positionality as the researcher be more imposing within a 1-on-1 environment? Would the quality of the data I collected be impacted?

As I prepared for the interviews, I could easily imagine it going either way. Thinking back to when I was a student, hearing one of my peers open up about their experiences would tend to make me feel more comfortable sharing my own. I also would have had a hard time speaking critically about an organization to someone that I perceive as an authority figure within that organization, especially if it were just the two of us. However, I also recognize that there were times I was able to better collect my thoughts and more candidly share my opinion because I was having a direct conversation with only one other person, rather than a group of people. Ultimately, I had optimism that the Action Research approach would be greatly beneficial to me in this situation. As a first-generation student and former student leader myself with my own

experiences to bring to our interaction, I believe I had a unique ability to overcome some potential barriers and make participants more comfortable with sharing their experiences.

The guiding questions I had prepared for students to answer were the following:

1. What student leadership positions have you held in the past? What positions do you hold currently?

2. What are some of the factors that led to you getting involved as a student leader?

3. Describe your overall impression of the experience of being a student leader.

4. Have you remained consistently involved as a student leader? If you are no longer involved, why not?

5. Can you think of any ways that the department could have better engaged with you/met your needs as a first-generation student?

The primary goal of these questions were to initiate conversation and stimulate thoughtful discussion that would be relevant to my research question. In addition to these questions, I planned to use active listening techniques to prompt students to clarify their responses, dig deeper into specific parts of an answer, or create space for a student to pause and reflect on the subject matter. Many of these original questions resulted in follow-up questions to sustain further discussion.

Findings from Interview 1

Interview 1 was with a student who identifies as First-Generation and holds a current leadership role within AS, in addition to holding a leadership role within a separate UCSD student organization. One thing that immediately became apparent to me was the student's uncertainty about the label "leader" and which of their experiences should qualify as leadership.

I realized this was a term that I had not formally defined for participants. I suggested that any work the student had done in service to their fellow students, where peers relied on their expertise or abilities for guidance in some way, could qualify as student leadership. While I feel this is probably an imperfect definition, it at least helped the student to speak more broadly about their work within AS without worrying whether roles they held were significant or substantial enough to qualify. This sense of uncertainty about the significance or importance of their experience became a recurring theme throughout our conversation, and I noticed the student would often hedge their answers with self-criticizing qualifiers such as "maybe that's dumb" or "I don't know if that makes sense". Contrary to these notions, I found their answers to be very rich and insightful, in a way that exceeded the expectations I had held for a virtual 1-on-1 discussion.

In Interview 1, the student shared that they were grateful for their experience in the organization because of their need for community outside the classroom. They noted that "I guess a huge part of (student) leadership is... having to work with other people. It's kind of my way of socializing." They also shared that the initial draw of Associated Students and other student organizations was not necessarily the leadership opportunity, elaborating that "I would join organizations for the social interaction, but then grow into more leadership roles". Over time, other factors contributed to their decision to remain a student leader, such as post-graduation plans. They explained that they "realized the importance of having leadership in the professional world… I needed it for survival in the future. But the positions I chose, I didn't just choose out of necessity. I chose it if I felt passionate about the kind of work it would do." The student would often return to this concept of connecting their student leadership work with

personal fulfillment and pursuit of individual passions. It became a defining theme for much of the remainder of our conversation.

Most interestingly for the purpose of this study, the student felt this connection between a fulfilling career and student leadership was particularly important to them because of their first-generation identity. They shared that "the privilege of being here (in America) is being able to have self-actualization and think of what your purpose in life is, and what you want to accomplish in this world during your time here. As a student leader I am able to do that." Since the student elaborated that their parents did not get to pursue careers that aligned with their passions, going to college was viewed as an opportunity to break away from this pattern and gain experiences that would lead to a purposeful career. For them, student leadership provided an out-of-classroom opportunity to gain tangible development in areas of personal interest.

While all of this information could be potentially helpful for AS to think about when refining their outreach methods, near the end of our conversation there was an opportunity to comment specifically on ways that AS could be improved for first-generation students. The main areas of potential improvement I identified within their response were *conflict management, visibility,* and *rigidity of organizational structure*. The student divulged that while it may initially be easy to join an organization like AS, "I don't know how to navigate conflict in a space I'm unfamiliar with… so sometimes it becomes more appealing to leave the space than to try to work it out." The student said this mostly related to their non-AS experiences but that it was often appealing to them to imagine stepping away from all their responsibilities as a student leader, because it would result in less interpersonal conflict that they felt unequipped to handle. They expressed that "sometimes the problems are so severe it can be overwhelming and the first gen

students get the short end of it and say *I don't know how to navigate this, I'll just leave the space*. I don't know how to solve that." It is important to note here that this reaction to conflict is not necessarily unique to first-generation students, nor should it be considered universally experienced by all first-generation students. However, non-first-gen students experiencing similar discomfort within an organization may find they have more support at home, via parents who have had similar experiences during their own time at college. This parental guidance may be able to help them identify solutions beyond total withdrawal, whereas the student in Interview 1 could not expect to receive this targeted advice at home.

The second area of improvement, visibility, was identified as a way for potential first-generation students to feel more confident applying to a leadership role or joining the organization. "If I were able to speak about my background I think that would be reassuring for people outside of AS to hear, or even people inside AS" the student shared. "...seeing people who are empowered can empower other people who are applying or thinking about it. Having more opportunities for people to voice that would be reassuring. It's more visibility." While the student didn't know in exactly what format these opportunities should occur, they recognized the lack of visibility that students with a first-generation identity often face. They also recognized that making this hidden identity more visible can empower other students who share it, and normalize the presence of first-generation students in leadership roles.

Lastly, the student commented on the impact that structural "norms and expectations" around professionalism and work performance can have on first-generation students. The student felt that some of the rules being enforced placed more of a burden on first-generation students who may not have comfortability or prior experience with them, and that standards such as

formal attire at meetings, for example, further highlighted the differences between students of different socioeconomic backgrounds. The student admitted that "when I enter spaces with non-first-gen people they tend to be wealthier and attitudes are a lot different. As a student leader, having to interact with people who are of a different socioeconomic status than you can be difficult. It's kind of frustrating sometimes." While this is likely a significant problem for retaining students who are first-generation in student leadership spaces, full examination of the impact of professionalism standards on first-generation and low-SES students is a weighty topic with impacts that reach far beyond the scope of this project.

At the end of interview 1, my parting request was that the student take time to reflect on our conversation, and gave them the option to follow up with me if they had any thoughts or updates at a later point. Eventually the student emailed me with some additional thoughts on how to approach this issue threatening first-gen retention within AS: "I think AS / other professional institutions should practice something like *institutional empathy / forgiveness / flexibility?* Honestly, if people could understand that all humans are going to make mistakes and we should cut each other some slack, the world would be a better place.". This thought-provoking email correspondence concluded my data collection from Interview 1.

Findings from Interview 2

Similar to the first, Interview 2 was also held with a student who identifies as First-Generation and holds a current leadership role within Associated Students. They had held other leadership roles within a separate UCSD student organization in the past. The student indicated they were excited about the opportunity to participate, and shared that they have eagerly looked for opportunities to share their experiences as a first-generation student with

others. Throughout the interview they expressed a sense of confidence and personal pride in their identity, indicating that they were able to use their unique perspective as a student leader to improve the campus for future generations of first-gen students. "I think it's a lot of wanting to give back to campus and wanting there to be things that I've left behind, because I would have enjoyed them if they were there in the first place." they commented at one point. "Like building for a younger version of myself. I always want to leave things better off than I found them." Thanks to the student's candor and enthusiastic engagement with the topic, this second interview once again exceeded the expectations I had held for Cycle 2.

The student shared that student leadership was important to them because it was a way to align "all my personal passions with my career goals." They elaborated that "I don't want to make a ton of money, I just want to do what I like. What life is about is what purpose you make out of it... I always try to pick things that extend that feeling and that drive that I have." They recognized that this was not always the case for student leaders, and that it was sometimes difficult to relate to fellow students who were filling a leadership role that did not seem to connect deeply with their personal interests and passions. "I think some people don't take it seriously or just as a resume builder." they shared. "That's what I find very disheartening. I wouldn't be taking this on if I didn't think I would do well." The student also recognized that this purpose-driven pursuit of excellence as a student leader was in part shaped by their first-generation identity. "I just don't see the purpose of being a student leader unless you have some target of something you want to change", they said.

As a first-generation student, they felt that they had plenty of ideas for changes that could be made. This part of our discussion was where we started to make some direct connections to

my research question, because they had noticed throughout their times in AS and other organizations that often leadership decisions were being made without a first-generation perspective involved. "There's a lot of help in being able to say *this is why this resource exists,* because first-gen students depend on these, but other students don't understand why we need them", they shared. They recognized that skills and abilities they had developed as a first-gen student defined the type of leader they were able to be. They recognized that their "ability to help people is so much better. I can understand where someone seeking help is coming from and the fact that I don't need to doubt that about myself is great. It's nice to be that kind of person in someone else's life." Because of the necessity to identify resources for their own success and survival as a student at UCSD, they were often depended upon by their non-first-gen peers for assistance in locating resources or navigating campus processes. They had become a leader not only in AS, but in their peer groups and student communities as well.

Due to having this lens of constantly thinking about ways campus could be improved, the student was eager to describe some opportunities for AS to adapt their current approaches. The main areas of potential improvement I identified from their responses were *time, finances, and visibility and recognition.* Time-related policies and practices, in particular relating to inflexible scheduling or penalties for lateness, was an area that they felt could place more of a burden on first-generation students. "Scheduling in general needs to be flexible or at least more understanding", they explained, because a first-gen student may be dealing with things that take way longer for them to learn to navigate in their collegiate environment than their non-first-gen peers. "That's a real sore point for a lot of people getting involved", they admitted.

Financial challenges that low-SES first-gen students face was also an area in which they felt other members of AS could grow in their awareness. "Being involved in student leadership, it's sometimes expensive to have to go out and make social connections with people who don't understand your cost/benefit". Many of the social bonding aspects of Associated Students were difficult for them to navigate because of a lack of personal financial resources. They felt that this was mostly true of other student leadership roles they had engaged in, and even that they had been able to make progress in this area within a separate student organization. They were proud of the fact that "I started advocating that we shouldn't do retreats that are cost-prohibitive and have some sort of financial support for students who can't afford these things. I feel like people looked at that engagement from me and thought, o*h look, she has something to say, she has experience in these areas*." The solution, from their perspective, was not to completely do away with social bonding opportunities. Rather, a stronger understanding was needed among their peers about which types of activities could exclude first-gen students.

The final area of improvement they believed would be beneficial was increasing the visibility of existing first-gen student leaders within the organization, and giving more public recognition of their contributions and accomplishments. One way to accomplish this would be data collection of current members, they thought, saying "I think it would be super interesting to poll and be able to say, *this many students in AS are low income and first-generation....* It would be great to communicate with the student body so they can feel like, *oh, there are people like me who have gotten there, I should reach out to them and talk to them*." They acknowledged that because of the hidden nature of this identity, it's often not clear to their peers where they are coming from on certain issues, or that they are speaking about first-generation issues from the

vantage point of living that experience. The student described looking for opportunities to reveal their first-gen identity during debates or disagreements with their fellow student leaders, and that it occasionally would come as a shock to their non-first-gen peers.

Reflection and Action

This concluded my data collection for Cycle 2. Again, the offer was extended to the student participant to take time for individual reflection and reach out with any additional thoughts or questions. While no further correspondence has taken place with the student at the time of writing this paper, I felt grateful for the student's evident zeal and enthusiasm for this topic, and was encouraged by the thoughts and ideas they shared. Upon reflecting about the experience of Cycle 2, I felt a great sense of relief that I had been able to connect with these first-generation student leaders. This was an accomplishment that at times had felt very far away. I felt a deep sense of gratitude not only for the students who had volunteered to participate, but for the level of engagement and openness that they brought to their interviews. I also felt affirmed by my own ability as the researcher to create a space for these interactions, and to cultivate a conversation that brought forth good and usable data. Ultimately I had wanted to come away from this cycle with the confidence that I would have solutions or recommendations for the department of Associated Students to consider. After undergoing this process and looking over my interview notes, I felt certain that this project was now going to be able to fulfill one of the core tenets of Action Research - to produce a benefit for the group that is being researched.

Limitations

While this foray into the experiences of first-generation student leaders yielded some interesting data which I am very excited to draw conclusions from, it's important to first

acknowledge the limitations of these findings. Over the course of these cycles, there were several opportunities for additional research that presented themselves, some of which could provide additional understanding of the factors that students weigh when deciding whether to become a student leader. In this section we'll highlight these areas of further exploration. Not only is there much more work to be done in this general area of research, it's also important to note the limits of taking this data and applying it across all first-generation students. This should be avoided for multiple reasons, some of which we'll discuss in this section.

Firstly, as previously mentioned, both students in Cycle 2 gave responses that indicated that their identity as a first-gen student was in many ways tied to other personal identities they held. While this was not the main focus of the project as defined in the original research question, it was clear that students were eager to reflect on their other identities and explore the interplay with these identities and their first-gen/student leadership experiences. The intersectionality of these additional aspects of identity presented me with additional questions and opportunities for more research, which would likely help to complicate or refine how a first-generation student's experiences are additionally affected by, for example, having parents who are themselves first-generation immigrants. Additional future research that explores intersecting identities in first-generation students could increase the usefulness of the data collected here, as it may help narrow down which involvement motivators are common across all first-gen student leaders, and which motivators are unique to specific sub-groups.

On a related note, both students interviewed for Cycle 2 indicated coming from self-described "low-SES" or "low-income" households. While one could look at this data and attempt to make generalizations about all first-gen student leaders coming from a similar

background, it's necessary to provide the caveat that these two students should not be treated as a representative sample of all first-generation student leaders. They should not even necessarily be treated as a representative sample of all first-gen student leaders within AS UCSD, as the total number of members with this identity at AS is currently unclear and a sample size of 2 presents room for outliers to negatively impact these types of conclusions. There may be first-gen students who do not share this low-SES background and would have different ideas about improving the organization because of this. There may be students with a low-SES background who are not necessarily first-gen but may feel very similar to my study's participants on these topics, or have overlapping experiences. The risk of taking a small group of students' experiences and transcribing them onto the complex stories of other first-generation student leaders would be erroneous, as much more data would need to be collected across a wider sample group in order for broader conclusions to be drawn.

Recommendations

Despite these limitations, there are some insights from this study which we can learn from with a high degree of certainty. While the data collected may be from a small sampling, this should not discount the significance of the perspectives and stories that have been shared by these participants. The students who chose to share their information (either via survey or interview) provided data that was not previously being collected by AS, and helped to identify several possible areas for the organization to improve their outreach methods. In service to the overall goal of creating a better environment for first-generation students at AS UCSD, every online posting about an open position in AS, every annual election marketing campaign, and every tabling event conducted by AS can be viewed as an opportunity to deploy and test these

recommendations. Conclusions about their effectiveness could possibly be drawn at a later point in time, once additional data about first-generation membership is collected.

Increased efforts to collect this sort of data should be considered a high priority, this study indicates. Early on, this was identified as one of the chief challenges I would face as a researcher, given that students with a first-generation identity can hide in plain sight and often do not self-identify. Normalizing the collection of this information from members across the different groups within AS, and creating more opportunities for first-gen members to discuss and publicly share this aspect of their identity was a recommendation from both interviewees. This could be accomplished as simply as creating a brief questionnaire that new members complete when they are onboarded. It could be as complex as developing official first-gen programming organized by AS, or a social media campaign to highlight the achievements of first-gen student leaders. As both interview participants indicated, this increased visibility and positive role modeling would potentially motivate other first-generation students to get involved and would make the organization appear more welcoming to first-gen students. Additional data should also be collected to assess the current outreach methods such as tabling at events. The survey data from Cycle 1, while inconclusive due to low response rates, leaves a lingering question about whether any first-generation students are being successfully reached at these events.

Another area of improvement identified by both interviewees was professionalism standards. While it remains unclear to me whether some professionalism standards such as a formal dress code could negatively impact recruitment, other standards such as attendance policies and scheduling inflexibility could possibly create a barrier to entry for first-gen students. This group of students may be more likely to be balancing multiple part-time jobs on top of a full

course load. These and other outside pressures may result in a first-gen student having a harder time fitting mandatory meetings or weekend retreats into their schedules. They may benefit more from the opportunity to extend a deadline or reschedule an interview. When rigidity in these areas is replaced by flexibility and grace, first-generation students are likely to benefit.

The most apparent solution proposed by either student to address this need seemed to be that fellow students (who are the ones creating and enforcing these organizational scheduling/attendance policies) could be better educated about the challenges that first-gen students face. An enhanced understanding of other students' perspectives would enable non-first-gen students to keep these factors in mind when creating and enforcing attendance policies. I know for myself, when I was an undergraduate student leader I assumed other students were making just as much of an effort as I was to balance all their responsibilities and remain a member in good standing. Becoming a staff member in the organization gave me a different vantage point that allowed me to observe that many student leaders were not working side-jobs, enjoyed more social time, generally held less responsibilities, and relied much more on parental support and involvement in their collegiate process than myself or other first-gen students. The sharing of perspectives among students with different lived experiences would greatly benefit the organization moving forward, as its members seek to create and enforce professionalism standards that are equitable for all students.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it's evident that at least some first-generation students are managing to find their path to student leadership via AS, choosing to remain in this space and contributing valuable efforts and a unique perspective to the campus community through it. Though the rate

that they become involved is not known, as a result of this study we know that the number is not zero. We also know that there is a current desire within at least some of the organization's membership to increase recruitment of first-generation students and make the space welcoming and supportive to this identity group.

Perhaps the most significant insight for me as a result of this study was the tremendously positive impact that engaging in student leadership within AS can have on a first-generation student. The purpose for this study's existence, as well as my personal passion for this topic, were continuously renewed by the thoughts and ideas these interviewees shared. Seeing their identity formation, self-actualization, and pursuit of personal passions all being fueled by their student leadership engagement was an important confirmation of previous scholarly work, but also confirmation that this project was worth every bit of effort that went into it. If Associated Students dedicates energy and resources to improve their outreach to first-generation students, even more of these purpose-driven young learners will have a chance to engage in this space and contribute positively to the organization, as well as to UC San Diego as a whole.

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