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Should We Move to Suspend Robert's Rules Forever: A Review and Proposal for Student Government Communication

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Abstract

The purpose of this action research project was to understand and improve how student leaders in student government (senators) communicate with one another during their meetings. My research question was, how can I effectively work with the Associated Student Government (ASG) at the University of San Diego (USD) to improve the senator's meeting communication through parliamentary practice? The use of Robert's Rules (parliamentary procedure) is common for student government. I analyzed mixed-method data through three cycles: focus group, survey, and semi-structured interviews. Findings indicate that there are pros and cons to meeting structures, most participants are open to different meeting methods, and that Robert's Rules training needs to be improved. Recommendations include senators being well-informed of their meeting structure options and a proposal to a hybrid meeting structure. Lastly, I communicated findings and recommendations with the Student Activities and Involvement team, ASG Executive Team, and Senate Lead Team.

Keywords: student government, parliamentary procedure, communication, Robert's Rules, Martha's Rules, student senate, higher education

Should We Move to Suspend Robert's Rules Forever: A Review and Proposal for Student

Government Communication

After completing a values activity in Spring of 2023, I discovered that I hold values in social service and justice, integrity, and vulnerability. I agree these values are the most important to me because they are everywhere in my life—whether that is in work, school, or personally. My values have shaped my interest in studying communication in college student government because many student representative groups use a communication structure named Robert's Rules of Order. These college student government meetings with Robert's Rules are structured— bounded by rules and prohibit discussion not in its boundaries. My values coincide with my research because student government is representative of the student body and with that, my value of social service and justice is vital in creating an open and inclusive space for all voices. My reflections on this value and research topic made me curious to explore how Robert's Rules help and hurt the various voices in the space. Another reflection I have around this value of social service and justice is around the access to the knowledge of Robert's Rules before a student serves on student government and their comfort level with using these rules after. There could be inequities in access to know how to communicate during a student government meeting leading to students not being able to effectively advocate for their constituents.

The value I hold in integrity and vulnerability go hand-in-hand. Student governments represent the student body and must be able to conduct themselves with integrity while also being vulnerable to understand others' emotions. Also, the use of Robert's Rules at student government meetings assists students in holding integrity in their work—such as having equal times allocated for discussions or presentations. Alternatively, the student government is full of

humans with emotions, so the ability to be vulnerable and open to sharing or listening to emotions is important. Reflections on vulnerability and integrity helped me narrow down my topic, which led me to focus on communication in the student government meeting space. Student governments are representatives for the student voice and have values such as social service and justice, integrity, and vulnerability through all their work.

An exemplary environment for the student government meetings (senate) to be conducted in, would be a space where student government leaders (senators) can speak their mind, represent their constituents (also known as the people they represent), and be heard by others. I am interested in conducting this research for that reason, students deserve to feel like they matter and they can communicate on behalf of their constituents in the senate space. The purpose of this study was to examine the current parliamentary procedure used with the Associated Student Government (ASG) at USD and assist with a proposal for best practices for senate meeting communication for these students. I examined the parliamentary procedure with cycles (focus group which covered different meeting structures, a survey, and semi-structured individual interviews). Through this examination, I have proposed best practices for the senators' communication during their senate meetings. I hope to add on the idea that Levinger (2021) suggested, that every organization should pick how they want to run their meetings. The phrase "improve communication" is a prevalent phrase used in my research. In this paper, improving communication was measured through the increase in numbers of those who verbally participate in a senate meeting. This is measured via how many times they participate based on the minutes from the meeting and results are reported on in the conclusion section. It is a brief comparison of the amount of times a participant spoke prior to and after participating in the project.

Background and Literature Review

This action research project's goal was to improve communication between ASG senators during their senate meetings using parliamentary procedure. This literature review begins with history, then goes into communication, staff and student connection, and student government.

History

University student governments typically use Robert's Rules, a type of parliamentary procedure, to structure their meetings. Robert's Rules was created by Major Henry Robert who initially created them after chairing a meeting and not knowing how to run it efficiently (Robert & Loss, 2021). Robert and Loss (2021) claimed these rules were viewed as the best when it comes to parliamentary practice. Additionally, Robert was said to have been active around adjusting the rules through observing groups using Robert's Rules. Robert's Rules were even highly influential to the higher education sphere; these rules are a "definitive guide for the rapidly growing higher education system" (Robert & Loss, 2021, p. XXIII). It is clear that Robert's Rules were prevalent in higher education democracy and they remain prevalent today.

Communication

Communication is a broad category, though this is the main topic of research for this action research. In this section, different areas of communication will be discussed—such as structures of communication (i.e., Robert's Rules and Martha's Rules). In the student government space, senate meetings take place and typically use Robert's Rules. And in general, higher education frequently uses Robert's Rules at many levels. Robert's Rules appear to be a topic with many opinions, some love it (Robert & Loss, 2022), while others rather do away with it (Levinger, 2021). On the pro-side, Robert and Loss (2021) said "we won't be able to solve the

problems we face unless everyone—students, faculty, administrators, elected officials, and ordinary Americans alike—plays by the same rules" (p. XXX). On the opposing-side, Levinger (2021) found Robert's Rules "formal, inflexible, and complicated" (para. 4).

In addition to the polarized views mentioned regarding Robert's Rules, there are also opinions that acknowledge both extremes of running meetings. For example, Roach (2020) explained how not having structure can be "chaotic," while having extremely structured meetings may not be received well by everyone. The reality of having structured or unstructured meetings is that not everyone is going to like what method is used. Similarly, it can be said that "even though a group benefits from structure, they may not act like it" (Roach, 2020, "Structure" section, para. 1). Though it could also be argued that it is important to gather more opinions on how to run a meeting, "*each organization should decide how*…[they] *want to decide*" (Levinger, 2021, "You Need Rules of Order – Just Not Necessarily Robert's" section, para. 3, emphasis in original). On the note of groups deciding for themselves what structure to use, Martha's Rules is another way to structure meetings.

Martha's Rules was a set of rules that was intentionally created to pose as an additional option to Robert's Rules. Martha's Rules are centered around consensus-making (Minahan, 1986), whereas Robert's Rules are focused on being fair and gathering majority (Robert & Loss, 2021). Although Martha's Rules were proposed to first be used in the social work space, they can be applied in other areas of work. As these rules are focused on consensus making, it values methods such as 'temperature checks,' which are informal votes, and a formal vote (Minahan, 1986). This set of rules puts forward the importance of a meeting chair to hold values such as

listening and being cognizant of the group's dynamics. Overall, Martha's Rules are focused on listening, being open to changing one's opinion, and caring for others.

Another impact on communication could be how different individuals may show up in the space and abide by rules or their roles. A method named BART gathers a closer look into the boundaries, authority, role, and task of a group (Green & Molenkamp, 2005). Boundary meaning the different methods of constraints put on a group (i.e., time) and authority meaning who does the work. Role means who was provided the role or who takes on the role, and task which derives from what may be recommended for the space at the time. These terms are used to describe the on-goings of a group. When taking this information from Green and Molenkamp (2005) and merging it with what we know of Robert's Rules, it is clear how these rules are in place for boundaries, task, and sometimes role. Although authority and role are separate to Robert's Rules, as they are part of governing documents such as the bylaws and constitution documents. One's ability to communicate or engage may also be related to their "personal authority" (Green & Molenkamp, 2005, p. 5). This means how " . . . an individual *takes up* formal authority" (Green & Molenkamp, 2005, p. 5, emphasis in original). This may be based on their identity, role, and experiences. People may experience the set of rules that a meeting follows differently based on who they are and how they embrace their authority position.

Staff and Student Connection

Even though this research is focused on the communication in the senate space, it is vital to also be informed on the outside conversations between staff and students. The relationship between students and staff has not always been a positive one, due to the lack of student voice being embedded in the university structure and students not feeling heard (Patrick, 2022).

Additionally, it is relevant to add that historically "students were viewed as not only subordinate, but inferior" (Patrick, 2022, p. 5). Although this is disheartening, this is why the student voice remains important to uplift especially due to student advocacy that can prevent harm in the student community. It appears this may be a larger theme, there is disconnect between students and staff when students demonstrate need.

Like what Patrick (2022) found with the student staff relationship, Lozano (2020) also found student presence almost pointless with their research between student trustees who attend university governing board meetings. Although basic contentment was found through this student trustee and university board, the influence of the student was not deemed significant (Lozano, 2020). This is surprising knowing that student-to-administrator relationships are viewed as a vital part of student governance. Even though the relationship between student and staff or administrator is not always effective, the relationships between students and their advisor is positive. When a student joins student government, they typically get an advisor who provides support, mentorship, and resources (Miles, 2011). Advisors hold a large role in ensuring their students have what they need to have the best experience they can.

Student Government

This category of student government goes hand-in-hand with the research on communication. Communication is a large component of student government. Student government bodies may use different methods of communication, such as a senate meeting using Robert's Rules and an executive meeting following an agenda. It is important to review past and current research on university student government to better understand the context of the student leader experience. Alexander (1969) provided literature with a "hopeful" take on what student

governments may look like in the future and provides different propositions of student government change. It includes changes such as a "delay" vote and a student government composed of 100 students that is thought to gain more administrative buy-in due to the amount of student voice that would be represented.

Additionally, Bloland (1961) examined a nontraditional student association which includes faculty and staff, this was created to be involved in student issues and make a real impact. Bloland provided a distinct method of student government, but possibly due to the staff involvement it may not be considered a legitimate student government. Bloland (1961) insisted this method is effective and claimed "student government—[is] a government which cannot govern in most institutional settings" (p. 97). This piece is in line with Alexander's (1969) article due to the mention of doing student government in a different way. The close partnership between students, faculty, and staff that Bloland (1961) explained, could be either beneficial or detrimental because projects take multiple years and sometimes student leaders do not get to see out their whole project through (Alexander, 1969).

Alexander (1969) and Bloland (1961) provided context to what was seen as problems or solutions over 50 years ago. Whereas the works of Workman et al. (2020) and Miller and Nadler (2009) provided an updated look into the student government sphere. More recently communication apprehension, a fear of communication, has been investigated. It was found that student government leaders' communication apprehension levels are normal, though their public speaking apprehension level is below average (Miller & Nadler, 2009). The reasoning could be a multitude of factors; consequently, observing the environment is beneficial for understanding why apprehension levels are middle to lower. On the note of the student government

environment, based on an individual's identities, they will experience leadership or student government differently. For example, woman-identified students had experiences as student leaders being influenced by gender and race, which further impacts how they lead (Workman et al., 2020). This ties into allyship and how people show up for one another in student government. Consequently, Clark (2019) proposed that to create an inclusive space, collaboration between different parts of campus and identity groups should be prioritized.

Lastly, some student governments have changed their structure due to hearing from students saying they believed the organization was sexist and homophobic (Adedoyin, 2021). It is important for groups to be able to reflect upon their values and make changes when needed, especially if there are claims of mistreatment. In the case of the student government, Adedoyin mentioned the student government '"got . . . comfortable with scrapping pretty much everything . . . and building from the ground up'" (Adedoyin, 2021, para. 8). Additionally, ensuring the student government is representative of the student body, they need to make sure to welcome people of all different identities. The model of student government Adedoyin (2021) explained, is a student government that specifically has positions for minority organizations to ensure representation. Although this is great, it is vital to make sure tokenization is not occurring. It would be interesting to examine the structure of this student government to understand why different groups may not be joining the organization after the changes. Overall, it is important to think outside of the box when reforming an organization and ensure one's values are reflected.

Context

My action research project was conducted at University of San Diego (USD), a private Catholic university located in San Diego, California. With an undergraduate student population

of approximately 5,700, USD claims to have 56% woman-identifying, 44% male-identifying, and does not provide a statistic for students who are nonbinary (University of San Diego, n.d.). USD reported around 44% of the population are students of color, meaning 56% of students are white—resulting in the institution being a predominantly white institution (University of San Diego, n.d.). As of 2022, USD had 24% of the undergraduate student population that identified as Hispanic and was classified as an emerging Hispanic Serving Institution (Piechalak, 2022).

This research project was completed with the student governing body at USD—the ASG. The ASG is the undergraduate student government that represents USD undergraduate students. The ASG is composed of four branches—executive, legislative, judicial, and the Torero Program Board. The legislative branch includes the senators, the group of students that this research was focused on. Although the senate space is open to all of the ASG and members of the public, the student senate is mainly composed of the legislative and executive branches. The senators are undergraduate students, and each senator position is specialized. For example, there are students who are specific representatives for living in on-campus housing areas, being a commuter student, being in a specific department (i.e., College of Arts and Sciences), or being an at-large representative. Senators have another name classification if they are a senate lead member, committee chair, or a coordinator—which is an added responsibility on top of being a senator.

The Student Activities and Involvement (SAI) campus department is the hub for student involvement on campus, specifically, student organizations, and the ASG. I serve as the graduate assistant for SAI. This means that I advise a portion of the ASG senators, attend the weekly senate meetings, and co-advise the Student Life Committee. At the senate meetings, my main role is to provide the microphone to anyone who is called on by the speaker of the senate, the

individual who chairs the meeting. It is also important to mention that in this student population, there is no specific demographic for a senator. The students are from various backgrounds, races, ethnicities, genders, sexual orientations, nationalities, socioeconomic status, ages, majors, life experiences, etc. Due to its diversity, senators provide many different perspectives in senate.

During my time as an undergraduate student, I became involved in student government. At my undergraduate institution there were two types of student government—campus wide and college specific. Campus wide student government was the main undergraduate governing body, whereas the college student government was a governing body that served a specific section of the population. In my third year, I joined the campus wide student government as a senator. Through this role I completed many projects to benefit my constituents but found the senate space to be intimidating. Even though I had basic Robert's Rules experience from having previous high school meetings which had rules and an agenda formatted with Robert's Rules, my undergraduate institutions' college student government was different.

In my undergraduate student government space, I was for the first time witnessing the rules being strictly used; therefore, I did not speak much during the year. Many times, the space moved so quickly, I could not gather my thoughts fast enough to make a motion or participate in discussion. Additionally, it did not help that the returners in our student government space had more Robert's Rules experience and would not leave space for many new student leaders (including myself) to participate. During the end of my time as a senator, an advisor recommended I take up a president role in the college student government. Although hesitant at first, I eventually ran and won the election—one of the most fulfilling community roles I have had to this day. In this college government space, I chaired the meetings, though I was more

lenient when it came to Robert's Rules. Overall, reflecting upon my experience in student government piqued my interest to research how to improve communication in these spaces for years to come and with the students I work with.

Project Rationale

During my time serving as a graduate assistant in SAI serving the student government, I made preliminary observations that sparked my interest in observing communication methods in the senate space. Traditionally, Robert's Rules are used in the student government space—my students also use Robert's Rules. Though, I have noticed two things in the use of Robert's Rules for senate meetings. The first thing is that senators will call a recess (a break in the meeting) and then some will huddle up in one area of the room to discuss their thoughts. The second thing is that when something goes on in the senate space, senators will sometimes have an informal debrief about the content of the meeting, not using Robert's Rules. My inquiry for my research was focused on understanding how senators currently communicate, and further assist them in how they can potentially communicate with different structures and procedures.

To secure project permission regarding the ASG senate, I worked with my department, SAI. Specifically, I worked with my supervisor, Manda Sayegh, the associate director of SAI, and Jennifer Lee, the director of SAI. When it came to additional information that would have been helpful to gather, I wish I was able to gather more resources on both Robert's Rules and Martha's Rules that are focused on student government. Unfortunately, there is little to no research on Robert's Rules and Martha's Rules and the intersection with student government. Another perspective I considered, even though it is out of higher education, was organizations who previously used Robert's Rules but may have changed the meeting structure.

The most important literature that informed my work was on Martha's Rules (Minahan, 1986) and learning about women's experiences in student government (Workman et al., 2020). Minahan (1986) provided more insight on alternative ways to run meetings. Whereas Workman et al. (2020) provided a perspective of how an underrepresented identity groups' experience was in student government. These women believed the perception of their identity impacted how others viewed and treated them in the role.

In this study, the participants were undergraduate students who are in the ASG and serve in the senator role. To gather participation, I was able to speak during the Final Business and Hearing of the Public section of senate meeting as an advisor to gather participants for a focus group that took place after a senate meeting. Additionally, I created a flyer (see Appendix A) and put it on the front of my desk, in the ASG cubicle area, and emailed it out to the senators to notify them of the project I was conducting (see Appendix B). I initially invited participants in the study via email, and asked individually if students would like to participate. I protected participants by making sure they knew exactly what they were getting into when joining my study, such as the time commitment. I made sure I protected my participants by using pseudonyms and meeting in closed-door spaces. Overall, I assured the safety of my participants' information.

Research Design

To generally structure this action research project, this project used O'Leary's action research method (Koshy, 2005). I picked this method because I found it the most fitting for my research knowing that the first two steps, observation and reflection, are at the heart of my project. For example, observing and reflecting on the senate space and/or senators, was in every

cycle. Being able to both observe and reflect is imperative to know the next two steps of O'Leary's method which are plan and act. Having both planning and acting as part of the cycle were needed because in action research, one needs to be adaptable to what the observation and reflection steps are bringing into the picture. My epistemological stance that I brought into my research stems from the hope to bring power to the student voice. Student government is all about advocating for students, what I like to think of as for the students, by the students. Throughout my research, I recognized I was an outside party, but I was still related to supporting these students and their comfortability and belonging as a Senator. I picked O'Leary's method because it presents as a flexible and adaptable method based on what was found during other research cycles, like how these students had to be adaptable to student's needs in their roles.

From the literature that consulted or discussed this project method, it appeared that it can be a favored method due to its lack of structure (Barron, 2020). This was beneficial due to the lack of structure so that the research cycles were able to inform themselves during the process. Though, there was possible concern with some action research methods that foster an open structure. This was due to not being knowledgeable of every outcome that could arise in situation-based research; hence, there could be concerns around ethics here (Friedman, 2011). For example, if a situational interview went in a direction that was not expected and that was not the intent, different outcomes than expected may be reached. Thinking about ethics during situational settings was principal in this research, especially in this action research project that was trying to elevate the student voice to create change.

I am convinced the best method for my project is action research. This is because of two things—elevating student voice and adaptability. As mentioned prior, this project elevated the

student voice, in typical research settings it is common for the researcher to embark on a research journey and be stagnant in processes and expected outcomes. The student outcome was to increase student participation in the senate space which was reflected upon in the conclusion section. Action research is a powerful method in this setting because the students had the opportunity to reflect on how to increase the student voice in their senate space. Lastly, adaptability was also key for this research due to the research being student-centered. It was important for this research to adapt to the needs of the students in the senate space.

As the strengths of action research were touched upon, there are also some challenges to action research. One of these challenges is that due to having flexibility in how the project is designed, this created indecisiveness. When there are endless creative possibilities to conduct research and a timeline to have a certain part of research done—a decision must be made, and sometimes this may be difficult. Additionally, with this method, if there are not enough participants, there are less ideas in envisioning a future senate space. This means that senators who do not participate may not like the outcome or may visualize the space differently.

Data Collection

For this action research project centered around the voices in the senate space, I had three full cycles. In preparation for this research, I reviewed the public postings of some past senate videos and tallied some of pre-existing participation data from these videos. The cycles began with focus groups, then a survey, and then a semi-structured interview (see Figure 1). Cycle 1's intention was to gather observations and possible preconceived notions of what the senate space meant to the students in the focus groups. Cycle 1 included hosting three focus groups and included five different parts (see Appendix C). The first focus group was three senators, the

second one was two senators, and the last one was seven senators (modified focus group). In these focus groups, participants completed a drawing of what they believe the senate space and Robert's Rules represent. Then the group reflected on Robert's Rules (the third focus group was a modified focus group and did not undergo this activity). Next, the group was exposed to Martha's Rules (a consensus making method), and then an open space for the students to reflect collectively what they thought about both rule methods. This focus group ended with a debrief based on what they learned, and this session was no more than 1 hour and 45 minutes long.

Next, Cycle 2 was a survey whose purpose was to solidify feedback from the students in the focus group to propose the most enjoyable meeting structure for senators. Cycle 2 also incorporated identity, for example, they were asked how their identities do or do not feel supported with Robert's Rules. This survey's purpose was to understand the impact of the focus group and student's experiences that were not captured in the focus group. The survey also ensured that individual voices were considered and heard, because with focus groups there was a potential for groupthink to occur. The survey was anonymous, so no name was attached to the individual's answers. Cycle 2's data were coded into themes when qualitative data were taken in free-response questions, and then statistics were gathered for quantitative data. Cycle 2's social identity data gathered was reported in a group and not individually to protect the anonymity of the participants. Lastly, Cycle 3 was a semi-structured interview which had 10 open-ended questions. The intention was to understand how the current senators envision the space to be in the future after being questioned of their opinions of Robert's and Martha's Rules, and their lived experience with these rules. Cycle 3 had an intention to confirm individual opinions and ensure that the recommendations put forward in this project were student-centered and elevated

senator's voices. Appropriate follow-up may take place during this interview. Each interview was 45 minutes in total. Additionally, Cycle 3's data were coded to develop themes.

During these action research cycles, the hope was to ensure all data were valid. This means that during focus groups, the survey, and the semi-structured individual interviews, that they were all asked the same questions (with exception of follow-up during Cycle 3). Also, this meant ensuring participants that their information will only be shared in a group manner, meaning that there will not be an identifying name associated with their answers (pseudonyms were used). During Cycle 1, there were three focus groups; therefore; data were observed across the three different groups. When the cycles were reflected upon, data were evaluated for themes. Lastly, at the conclusion of this project, the action research recommendations were provided to the Department of SAI, the executive branch, and senate lead team of the ASG. The hope of this project was to get students thinking, so they would reflect on their experience as a student leader, and if they wanted, to advocate for themselves for changing a system of communication (Robert's Rules) they perpetuate year after year.

Figure 1

Cycle Review

Cycle 1

Focus Groups:
- Duration ranges from 45 minutes to 1 hour, 45 minutes
- Activity based

- Focus Group 1 (3 participants)
- Focus Group 2 (2 participants)
- Focus Group 3 (7 participants)

Cycle 2

Survey:
- Duration - 1 week
- 8 participants total
- Question types: multiple choice, likert scale, and free response

Cycle 3

Semi-Structured Interview:
- Duration - 45 minutes
- 4 participants total
- 10 questions + follow up questions allowed

Cycle Results and Findings

As mentioned prior, this project had three cycles and collected both qualitative and quantitative data. There were many themes that emerged from each cycle which led me to understand what students believed to be helpful in promoting more participation in the senate space. Cycle 1's main themes were that both Robert's Rules and Martha's Rules have their own strengths and weaknesses and senators learned and hoped to take forward characteristics of Martha's Rules. Cycle 2's main themes were that overtime senators grew comfortable with Robert's Rules, meeting structure is important, recesses allow for free-flowing ideation, and Robert's Rules does not uplift underrepresented voices. Cycle 3's main themes were that an ideal meeting has agenda and timing, simple majority voting was favored, how Robert's Rules benefitted them, and how underrepresented voices are not uplifted with the rules. In the next section I provide an overview of the cycle and the specific themes that emerged from Cycle 1.

Cycle 1 Overview

Cycle 1 set out to gather a better general understanding of what student's current impressions were around Robert's Rules and to introduce and reflect with a new type of rules—Martha's Rules. The cycle had an intention of being collaborative to gather the richest data. We did several activities throughout each focus group (see Appendix C). The data for the focus groups was organized with preliminary review, then a grouping per activity and question, and then reviewed again for quotes. Next, I discuss the themes that emerged from the focus groups: symbolism of senate space and Robert's Rules, the facilitation and lack of collaboration from Robert's Rules, holding the dichotomy between the pros and cons of Robert's and Martha's Rules, and senators favoring characteristics of Martha's.

Theme 1: Symbolism of Experience with Senate and Robert's Rules

In one activity, students were asked to draw two pictures: one of what the senate space symbolizes and one of what Robert's Rules symbolizes. In the senate drawings, students drew two main things: circles or complex connections between senate members or outside entities. Most students drew drawings of a circle with people surrounding the circle (see "2A" in Figure 2). This was a symbol of how they perceive the senate space, possibly inferring that people have an equal seat at the table or they may have been drawing how senate is set-up. This perception was similar to and inspired by ideas Green and Molenkamp (2005) put forth regarding the "use of the unconscious through images and metaphors" (p. 8). Other students drew drawings of complex relationships which depicted various things—one touched upon the notion of senate being an equal space where there are clear rights and wrongs, though there is a lack of equity (see "2B" in Figure 2). Another one of the drawings depicted a "playbook" that displayed how

there are team players and each person being a unique "player" with onlookers (see "2C" in

Figure 2). Lastly, there was another drawing of students on one side of the page and

administrators on the other side of the page, further depicting the separation felt when

advocating. Overall, these pictures depicted togetherness, whether that is symbolized through a

circle or in a complex drawing of the relationship between senators or administrators.

Figure 2

Senate Drawings: Circle Symbol Examples
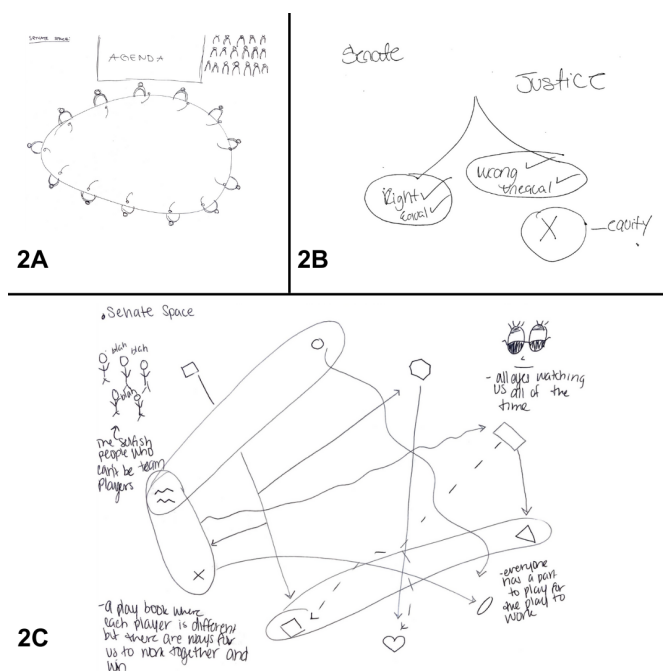
In the Robert's Rules illustrations, there were two overarching themes: rules and a

senator's relationship to the rules. The drawings of the rules or a book of rules varied slightly—

some pictures were of a book of rules (see "3A" in Figure 3) and some pictures communicated

what the pillars of the rules were (see "3B" in Figure 3). These drawings under the rule category

all showed some type of structure, discipline, or order. On the other hand, the drawings that were

not under rules showed a more nuanced relationship to Robert's Rules. For example, Blake drew

a rule book, but also symbols of a stop sign and a person sleeping who also could not talk. When

Blake discussed their drawing, they mentioned how the rules make the meeting boring (see "3C"

in Figure 3) "[while] it's good to have rules and regulation . . . I feel like it's just over

exaggerated like you have to ask to speak then you have to do this and that." The drawings for

Robert's Rules illustrated the student's perception of the rules, and in some cases, how they

interact with the rules in senate.

Figure 3

Robert's Rules Drawings: Book and Complex Relationship Between Senator and Rules
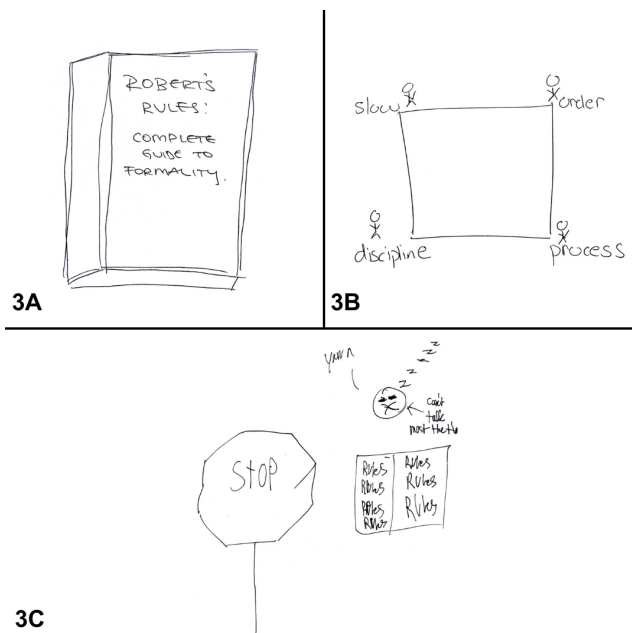
Theme 2: The Facilitation and Hindrance of Voice

The next activity consisted of two questions: How do Robert's Rules help facilitate your

participation in senate meetings? And how do Robert's Rules help you collaborate with other

senators in senate meetings? These questions brought the balance of how Robert's Rules helps or

does not facilitate participation and how it helps or does not help collaboration. While in senate

meetings, they find Robert's Rules to be helpful for communication. For example, Frankie said:

> I do think that like, it helps facilitate . . . for me specifically because it's like, okay, I'm
>
> going to be called on and it's going to be my turn. And so it's not a, I have to . . . fight
>
> somebody else to like, speak up first, or . . . just be louder.

Robert's Rules can assist in facilitation if senators find it difficult to interject themselves, the

rules provide the speaker to have the space to express their opinion without interruptions into a

conversation. On that note, students also find Robert's Rules as a universal equal playing ground

for conversation. Parker asserted that "it is pretty fair to everyone like it seems . . . universal."

On the contrary, even though the question specifically asked about how the rules

facilitated their participation, there was a resonating answer across two of the focus groups about

the rules being a barrier at first. While these rules may be viewed as universal, they are not innate

knowledge everyone holds. Logan shared, "I think, initially, it hindered my participation,

because I didn't know about it as much. And so, I think that that's definitely . . . a learning

curve." Logan also expressed that overtime they were able to skillfully learn and use the rules.

When the senators discussed Robert's Rules and collaboration in a positive manner, they

discussed two overarching topics: actively listening to others' opinions and the use of recess for

collaboration. In Robert's Rules, there are guidelines that have the meeting structured in a way

that you do not need to voice your opinion or question if it was already said or asked. To Frankie

this seems like a meaningful way that the senators are collaborating and listening to one another:

> everybody kind of is required to listen to other people before they can speak themselves,
>
> especially . . . even when sometimes people have to cede their time, because it was

already said, I don't think that a lot of us would notice that the question was already

asked if we weren't . . . required to sit in wait.

Robert's Rules ability to slow down and allow for students to consider what their peers are

saying before interjecting allows students to intentionally participate. In addition, the ability to

take a recess during a meeting (a break that is specified by an amount of time during a meeting)

is another way that Robert's Rules promote collaboration. Cameron affirmed the usefulness of a

recess, they asserted that "when we suspend Robert's Rules, we get a lot of participation,

because no one's . . . afraid to speak up. So, when there's . . . speakers coming in . . . everyone's

happy to raise their hands." This senator brought to light the power of recess, a time in the

meeting where there is a lack of structure and oftentimes where collaboration occurs.

As senators discussed how Robert's Rules assist in their collaboration, they also discussed

a few ways it may have hindered their collaboration with one another. There were a few different

mentions—feeling a hindrance from the rules and being able to activate others. One senator

shared that they could not activate or uplift other senators who may be more hesitant to speak up

in the space through Robert's Rules. Logan said "I wish that I was . . . closer to them and able to

kind of encourage them to speak because I know that . . . [they] have like fears about speaking up

in Senate." Overall, it appears that Robert's Rules can bring senators together to have a meeting,

but not all senators may feel ready to use the rules. For some senators, they wish they had the

autonomy to pull these senators in, who may need some conversational prompting to engage.

Theme 3: The Dichotomy of Robert's Rules vs. Martha's Rules

After learning Martha's Rules, senators were invited to share the pros and cons of both

Robert's Rules and Martha's Rules. When elaborating on the pros of Robert's Rules, students

pointed out three main things: its clarity, how impersonal it was, and its applicability. Similar to

how Robert's Rules help facilitate participation, the notion around the rules being clear and

providing that space for when to speak was evident. Jordan said "I think since it's so clear and

formal, there's not really room for people interrupting people getting offended or called out."

Jordan mentioned that the rules remove the personal side of things.

　　In another focus group, this same theme came to fruition, Logan also discussed this

concept "[Robert's Rules] almost makes it . . . impersonal." In their senator roles, they represent

other undergraduate students, and the ability to separate the self from the idea can be beneficial

for advocacy. Another topic that emerged was how Robert's Rules is universal. Casey explained,

"Robert's Rules is…the most straightforward option, I guess, because it's known . . . from . . . a

lot of legislative bodies." Using a rule system that is well-known can have benefits for student

government leaders, as it serves as a transferable skill.

　　When student's discussed the cons of Robert's Rules, students were so passionate about

sharing, that in the majority of focus groups, they exceeded the time boundary allocated. The

main cons communicated for Robert's Rules were the lack of communication or openness or the

rules as a barrier. Around this same topic, students discussed that the rules are not conversational

and limiting to the public. Due to these opinions, senators mentioned that being open to the

public during senate could be perceived as an illusion. Riley described how administrators may

view the use of Robert's Rules as a barrier to engagement. Riley stated, "speakers come in, who

are not familiar with . . . [the rules and] the structure of Senate in general. Like today, when . . .

[a campus administrator] presented we kind of had to . . . suspend [the rules] . . . because . . .

[they were] seeking . . . participation." Riley also explained how this lack of openness may

impact the relationship building with campus entities, they said "you're following the rules and whatever, but at the same time . . . the point is to be able to . . . [form] positive relationships with other aspects of campus." The rules have a lack-of-empathy that creates a barrier between people who are senators and those who are not (similar to "2C" in Figure 2).

Students not only described the barrier between them and administrators with the rules, but they also discussed a greater barrier the rules create for them to engage in the space. Some of the parts of the rules they mentioned were the following: people voting to vote, "point of personal privilege," and stack. Regarding the vote to vote comment, participants mentioned that sometimes senators may not have enough knowledge to vote or they are influenced by the people around them. Riley emphasized that students may have this train of thought when asked to vote in a meeting, "'Oh, I'm just gonna vote to vote, like, I'm just gonna vote, whatever what everyone else is voting.' Because they feel like abstaining isn't even like, really an option." Abstaining, which does not count for or against the vote, is not encouraged because with votes there are quotas for it to pass (i.e., majority or two-thirds affirmative). Due to the pressure around not abstaining, it creates a lack of voting intentionality culture. In addition, "point of personal privilege" and stack create barriers for students to operate efficiently in the space. "Point of personal privilege" is something a senator may say at any time in the meeting to excuse themselves from the space, though they have to be recognized and excused by the speaker. This creates a barrier for moving efficiently. Also, stack is a method of organizing who gets to speak, on a first-come equally-served basis. For example, senators do not get to speak a second time before all others are provided the opportunity to speak once. This creates a barrier to open communication due to time passing from when you want to speak to when you get to speak.

As mentioned prior, students were exposed to Martha's Rules—they both got to learn about the rules and try to practice them with a sample agenda. They were then asked about the pros and cons of Martha's Rules. Students conveyed that they liked the openness of structure and the proposal and voting process. Regarding the openness of structure, Cameron discussed how the structure allowed for collaboration, "we were building off of each other's [ideas], which I think is something that doesn't really happen with Robert's Rules as much." Cameron directly draws a stark comparison of Martha's versus Robert's Rules here.

Student's perceived the structure being more open and flowing, though another apparent difference with Martha's Rules is that it proposed a unique way of voting—there are two rounds of voting. The first round as a preliminary indicator if certain proposals should have a final vote. And the second round being the final vote. Frankie described the benefit of the preliminary vote:

> I liked that . . . there were options of yes, I like it, I could live with it, and then . . . I'm
>
> not comfortable with it . . . . Like yes, no, and abstain is not giving the same as like, I can
>
> live with it, I'm uncomfortable with it.

Around the topic of voting, Martha's Rules were also praised for the elaboration that people get to have during the voting process. Having the opportunity to have two types of voting rounds allowed for senators to share why they may oppose or be uncomfortable with an agenda item. This allows for better consensus making, which Martha's Rules strive to do (Minahan, 1986).

On the other hand, students also expressed concern around aspects of Martha's Rules— how it is personal, lacks boundaries or organization, and creates more work for implementation. Due to the lack of structure in Martha's Rules when it comes to discussion of something proposed, there were thoughts from senators that it could become too personal. For example,

Cameron asserted that they "think you could leave with an enemy . . . [if] things are said poorly." As the rules are not formal, there is a possibility for conversation and debate to become casual and, therefore, less orderly. The ability to monopolize the conversation was another concern, Riley mentioned, "it does give people the opportunity to . . . monopolize the conversation or the discussion." Senators also mentioned that Martha's Rules are disorganized which may create a perception as being disorganized as a student government or to members of the public.

Lastly, if senators were to adopt Martha's Rules, there would be concern regarding the work and time that would go into the implementation or practicing of it. The concerns brought forward were the need for a strong facilitator for Martha's Rules and the voting system being confusing. Due to the openness, there is less organization, and more of a chance for bustling conversations to occur. Logan declared "a really strong facilitator would be the key" to being able to navigate organizing the group. Relating to the voting system, there were concerns over the implementation, Kerry contributed, "it's a lot of options. And people would probably be switching around throughout as they learn more information." Kerry brings up an important point regarding the organization and consensus of voting as the conversation unfolds.

Theme 4: Learn and Take Forward Characteristics of Martha's Rules

There were three main takeaways for what senators learned from the focus group—they learned Martha's Rules, conversational barriers from Robert's, and Martha's Rules vs. Robert's Rules. Similarly, there were three main themes for what senators were taking with them from the focus group—the implementation of Martha's Rules or a more conversational approach, a new view of Robert's Rules, and the activity of drawing. There is correlation between what students learned and were hoping to take forward. Students reported that they learned Martha's Rules

(50% of participants) and students reported the thing they wanted to take forward was Martha's Rules or a more conversational approach to senate meetings (83% of participants).

Cycle 1 Summary of Findings

Overall, the focus group provided substantial data to understand the current pulse on Robert's Rules in senate and how Robert's Rules have helped and hindered senators in the space. Beginning with symbolism activity, the data exemplified that when senators think of the senate, they think of a circle with people and when senators think of Robert's Rules they think of rules. Though there was data for both drawings that illustrated more complex thinking of both the senate and Robert's Rules. During the focus group, there were also various topics brought up regarding how and how not Robert's Rules facilitated participation and encouraged collaboration. For facilitation, it appeared that the rules helped provide a space and platform to speak where they are not interrupted by others. Whereas the rules may have not facilitated senators' participation at first, serving as a barrier of communication. On the other hand, senators appreciated how Robert's Rules allowed for recesses and for active listening to be instrumental in participating in the rules. Though Robert's Rules could improve on the collaboration front, for example, for senators to be able to encourage others to speak up.

Specifically, when it came to comparing Robert's Rules with Martha's Rules, they are two quite different systems. A key quote from the focus groups was something Parker contributed, "[with Martha's Rules,] certain people would get lost in the chaos, just as they would get lost in the silence of Robert's Rules." The focus groups shined a light on how there are pros and cons to any form of meeting structure. The comments that were pros for Robert's Rules, were cons of

Martha's Rules and vice versa. Lastly, senators expressed that they learned Martha's Rules and wanted to implement these rules or characteristics of Martha's Rules moving forward.

Cycle 2 Overview

Cycle 2's survey gathered information on the general population of the project and data on the group's opinions on Robert's Rules, Martha's Rules, and also allowed them to express their opinions through free response. The eight participants data were collected anonymously and reported in a group to protect the identities of those in this project. The survey collected demographic information, Likert scale styled questions, and free-response questions. First to cover the demographic data, for the year in school there were the following reports: Second (37.5%), Third (25%), and Fourth (37.5%). For the number of years students were in senate, 25% of participants were first years in senate and 75% of participants were second years in senate. Additionally, 50% of participants had an elevated leadership position (committee chair, coordinator, or are on senate lead team). Race/ethnicity as reported (senators identified the race(s) or ethnicity(s) they identify with): Black (2), Filipino-American (1), Indian (1), Pakistani (1), Russian (1), and white (5). For gender identity, 100% of participants were women or female-identifying. For sexual orientation, students identified as: Bisexual (2) and Heterosexual (6). Lastly, for religion or spirituality, students identified as: Agnostic (1) and Muslim (1).

There were also free response data which were coded for themes. There were three main questions—which uncovered opinions on meeting structure, barriers to participation, and the role of Robert's Rules (see Table 1). Most notably from the first question regarding meeting structure, participants highlighted the term respect, which included the ability actively listen without interrupting one another. From the second question, the most common theme for barriers to

participation was Robert's Rules. One senator mentioned, "the barriers to participating in senate meetings is insufficient knowledge or lack of confidence using Robert[']s Rules of Order. When . . . a few participating members . . . are not comfortable using Robert's Rules, it can hinder the progress of the meeting." The third question about the role of Robert's Rules, participants most commonly viewed the rules as a way to structure the meeting. In addition to these questions, students were also asked about how they would describe Robert's Rules and one word to describe an ideal meeting (see Table 2). Putting these words next to one another, proved that there was still more to uncover around how an ideal meeting may not be with Robert's Rules.

Table 1

Free Response Question Themes.

What are the most important aspects of a meeting structure?	Number of Theme Mentions
Respectful	5
Communication	5
Structure	3

What barriers, if any, are there to participating in senate meetings?	Number of Theme Mentions
Robert's Rules	7
Lack of open discussion	2

In your opinion, what is the role of Robert's Rules in Senate?	Number of Theme Mentions
Structure	8
Formality or respect	4

Table 2

Chart comparing Robert's Rules vs. an ideal ASG Meeting.

If you could use one word to describe Robert's Rules, what would it be?	If you could use one word to describe what an ideal ASG Meeting would feel like, what would it be?
Outdated	Tedious
Orderly	Celebratory
Difficult	Efficient
Strict	Lively
Structure	Structured*
Formal	Comfortable
Organized	Welcoming
Complicated	Satisfying

Note: The asterisk (*) was a coded answer. The participant did not put one word.

The last extra question asked participants to add additional comments that connect their beliefs expressed in the survey to their experience in the focus group. One senator contributed:

I believe that the use of rules of order are necessary in senate meetings; however, I do not believe that either Robert's or Martha's Rules of order are perfect systems . . . . Martha's Rules of order encouraged . . . discussion and participation; however, from my experience in the focus group, I believe that Robert's Rules of Order are much more efficient.

This thoughtful comment points out the dichotomy of neither system being perfect as both rule systems have their own strengths. Robert's Rules as efficient and Martha's Rules as collaborative.

Cycle 2 Summary of Findings

Cycle 2 poses interesting pieces of data. Beginning with the demographics, it is clear that there are historically privileged identities reflected in the participants—white and heterosexual. Another demographic point which was interesting was that there were no reported Catholic

identities, and USD is a Catholic university. Additionally, there were no first year students who participated in the survey. It is possible that the project was not appealing to first year students due to Robert's Rules possibly being a new system they are navigating. Connecting this belief to data, when it came to the individuals in this project an average of 2.88/5 rated their prior experience with Robert's Rules (category: little knowledgeable). Though the participants in this project also reported feeling knowledgeable and confident with an average of 4.25/5 (see Table 3). As seen here by the data, practice with the rules does assist in the ability to eventually feel more comfortable with them. In Table 4 one can see the importance of meeting structure (average: 4.63/5) and recesses being an avenue for communicating ideas freely (average: 4.88/5).

Table 3

Theme: Previous Experience, Comfortability, and Agency.

Statement	Average Score
What was your experience with Robert's Rules prior to ASG?	2.88
How knowledgeable do you feel with using Robert's Rules in ASG after being in Senate?	4.25
How comfortable do you feel with using Robert's Rules in ASG after being in Senate?	4.25
Robert's Rules help me communicate during a senate meeting.	3.25
Robert's Rules hinder my participation during a senate meeting.	3.63

Table 4

Theme: Components of the Meeting (Structure and Recesses).

Statement	Average Score
Structure in a meeting is something that is needed.	4.63

I like to take a recess to get a break during the Senate meetings.	3.00
Taking a recess can be helpful to talk more freely about my ideas with my peers.	4.88

A section of data that was particularly surprising was how senators were rating how they would like to move forward in the senate space. It is clear that they believe that there are certain aspects of the meeting structure they like, but when asked about Robert's Rules, there was a lack of affirmative support with a 3.13/5 score. The highest score in this section (see Table 5) was the rating for using a different method of meeting but not knowing just what that is yet, with a score of 3.63/5. This data may connect with Table 6's data—the score that is the lowest out of all questions was if "Robert's Rules uplift underrepresented voices" with an average score of 2.75/5. This is compelling with the data not representing of a multitude of identities (such as the lack of first year students and senators) and senators with elevated leadership positions being half of those who filled out the survey. Equality was also mentioned and something students found helpful for navigating in the senate space, though this is contradictory with the data found on underrepresented voices perceived as not being uplifted in the space.

Table 5

Theme: Best Way to Move Forward.

Statement	Average Score
Robert's Rules is the best way to run the ASG Senate Meeting.	3.13
ASG should use a different method of meeting structure, but I do not know which method would be best.	3.63
ASG should use a different method of meeting structure, such as Martha's Rules.	3.00

I would like to use Robert's Rules, but I think Senators should have more training on how best to use Robert's Rules.	3.50

Table 6

Theme: Recognition in the Space by the Rules or by the Senate.

Statement	Average Score
Robert's Rules uplift underrepresented voices.	2.75
Robert's Rules serves as a way to recognize my identity in ASG Senate Meetings.	3.00
Robert's Rules is important to treat everyone the same and elevate all voices the same.	3.75
ASG senate meeting is a place where I can communicate my ideas openly.	3.75
The ASG senate meeting is a place where my ideas are taken seriously.	4.38

Cycle 3 Overview

Cycle 3 incorporated the voices of students in this study through 45-minute semi-structured interviews with four senators. Students were asked the same ten questions (see Appendix D). As student government is a student-centered space, the intention of this cycle was to continue to ensure that student's individual voices shaped what was recommended at the end of this project. This cycle was meant to solidify what senators believed would be helpful moving forward when it comes to senate communication methods. During these interviews, there were common themes around what participants shared—such as agenda and timing being most important aspects of an ideal meeting, simple majority vote being favored, Robert's Rules remaining professional and at the same time not uplifting unpopular opinions, and the dichotomy of Robert's and Martha's Rules.

When students were asked to explain their ideal meeting and what are the important parts of a meeting, the two main common answers was the need for an agenda or discussion topics and time. For both topics majority of senators reported this as important. As for other topics mentioned when asked about an ideal meeting, students shared the importance around having a designated person to run the meeting, representatives, recess, and less than 30 people in a meeting. Additionally, if senators did not mention the following topics, they were asked for their thoughts: agenda, time boundaries, time limits, language used in the meeting, and voting. For formal language used in meetings, there were two different opinions—one that was for keeping the space informal when addressing someone (i.e., using someone's first name they go by) and one that was for keeping space formal when addressing someone (i.e., saying "senator" and the first name they go by). Around the topic of language, students mentioned that some type of structure is either important or the best option for meeting organization (i.e., such as Robert's Rules). With voting, majority of senators favor simple majority. Lastly, timing was deemed as an important, but there were various perceptions of what is best for timing. There were opinions on appreciating time limits and limiting the number of times someone spoke in a discussion.

Next, senators were asked about their beliefs regarding Robert's Rules contributing to the meeting outcomes. The consensus for this question from the participants was that generally, yes Robert's Rules (or rules in general) impacted the outcome. Though senators believed that even though there was impact from the rules, it was not not good nor bad. In addition to this opinion of Robert's Rules being an influence, senators also highlighted that the rules ensure that the space remains respectful and professional. For example, Avery explained, "in certain events, like when there are specific conversations going on that are actually productive, and might even be a little

bit controversial, I think that Robert's Rules contribute to the outcome of the meeting . . . it remains respectful." On the note of respect, a senator also believed that the rules help them maintain a level of professionalism, "we are doing our job, and separating ourselves from our personal lives." This quote proved that having a set of rules, assisted in the professionalism of the space and for the ability to separate themselves from the beliefs of their constituents.

The participants in this project were asked to share if their participation in senate has been prompted or limited by Robert's Rules. The students mentioned that when they get to speak in senate, they get to voice what they want. Senators also shared that the rules hinder their participation, and their participation was encouraged in the senate space due their elevated leadership position. Next, students were questioned if they can attribute their development being encouraged or limited by Robert's Rules. Some participants described that Robert's Rules have encouraged their confidence. This was observed through what Avery spoke upon:

> I know about the respect that is expected of everybody when one person is speaking, it has really developed my public speaking skills a lot. And . . . I don't get quite as nervous anymore . . . I actually feel empowered to . . . say what I mean, and mean what I say.

Though a few participants also explained that their participation was limited in situations where they were wanting to go against the majority. For example, Jesse expressed, "there have been times where . . . I want to . . . move to vote or move to do something differently than what other people think. And so then I'm like, well, I'll just wait for someone else to do it." Another one of the participants also shared they experienced difficulty with their confidence in senate and in their senator role due to Robert's Rules. Carey elaborated, "I think Robert's Rules in . . . senate meetings kind of killed my confidence a little bit. And so, I brought that with me outside

of senate meetings." Ultimately, both sides of opinion around Robert's Rules and development were prevalent—encouragement and limitation from Robert's Rules.

The question about if Robert's Rules uplift underrepresented voices gathered impactful insights from the participants. When the students answered this, there were two main themes— the first year senators voice was missing, the barrier that Robert's Rules posed to the public, and the impact on historically underrepresented voices. Generally, senators did not believe that Robert's Rules uplifted underrepresented voices. Senators conveyed a missing voice from the first year senators in the senate. Carter explained, during "their first semester in Senate [they] don't necessarily want to raise their placard and that's a really important voice in the undergraduate student [body]." Carter brought up the potential disservice this was for first year senators. Also, with the common theme around the barrier Robert's Rules posed to the public, Carey took it one step further to explain how senate interacts with the public or student organizations that come to senate to present, there is an:

> intimidation factor of Robert's Rules as an outsider, like someone who's not even involved in student government would definitely be affected because . . . you might be afraid to do something wrong, especially if you're not even a part of the senate team.

Senate meetings include the public, especially as students ask for ASG funding. Carey also conveyed how they believe that asking questions to groups who come in, especially historically underrepresented groups, is the respectful thing to do to ensure senators have enough information for their vote. They also shared that for those who are historically underrepresented, navigating Robert's Rules may be another barrier to sharing their experiences that is present in senate.

The next question was inquiring about students' prior experience with Robert's Rules and if they have grown with using the rules. Some had prior knowledge of Robert's Rules while others did not have any prior knowledge. For those who did not have prior Robert's Rules experience, they feel more comfortable now after having some time with the rules. Whereas the others who had experience, felt the same from when they began or learned more intricacies with Robert's Rules. The question regarding Martha's Rules being a sufficient fit for senate and how it compared to Robert's Rules gathered various answers. The answers around Martha's Rules were split—some found Martha's Rules ineffective while others found Martha's Rules effective. For the answers that found Martha's Rules ineffective, students believed that the rules would not be suitable for senate meetings due to the amount of students in senate meetings. For example, Avery shared, "for Senate meetings, I do not think that it would be an effective method. I think that it's an effective method for . . . small meetings, like our committee meetings." The dichotomy, which was very prevalent from the focus groups, was present here again. Senators who shared this opinion believed that Robert's Rules were more efficient than Martha's Rules.

The next two questions were reflective questions—what they would change about Robert's Rules, and if they have any last thoughts. For what students would change about their use of Robert's Rules, students believed in adding to or changing the space. With adding to the space, senators shared that agenda time sign ups for senators to speak and a more developed Robert's Rules training would be helpful. With changing the space, senators mentioned—timing, voting, no formality, and seating. With time, majority of senators mentioned this topic being something they wanted to change. Some senators believed it was too easy to extend time on a line item during a meeting, while another expressed that the speaker of the senate should have

the agency to discern time allocation. Another idea was to change up the seating in senate to increase collaboration across the space.

When it came to the themes around voting and the want for senate to be more casual, both of these were also wanted by majority of the senators. The topic of changing voting entailed the want for all votes to be majority vote or the use of Martha's Rules voting moving forward. Regarding the topic of being more casual during the meetings, two participants do not want to move forward with addressing their peers by their position (i.e., saying "senator" then their name). Lastly, the main theme when students were asked of last thoughts, senators shared that they never reflected on Robert's Rules prior to this project. Avery shared their study reflections:

> I had never really thought a lot about the structure of . . . Robert's Rules, except for in a negative way . . . . But . . . after doing this study, and actually having to look at . . . both the positives and the negatives of it, I do see . . . why it's really valuable.

Avery also shared how this project made them reflect on younger senator's participation in the space. Overall, it appears that this project allowed for reflection and proposed ways of change for the senate space moving forward in how senators can communicate better with one another.

Cycle 3 Summary of Findings

After analyzing the results, it is evident that agendas and timing are the two most important topics around an ideal meeting. Especially this theme of timing remained as a prevalent theme during the interviews. When it comes to voting, most senators believed a simple majority being sufficient, which would be a shift from Robert's Rules different quotas for votes depending on the item. Senators also believe that the rules of the meeting do impact the income, though it was not necessarily a positive or negative impact. During the interview, Robert's Rules

tended to be praised on its ability to maintain the peace in conversation, demand respect of who

is talking, and provide a level of professionalism. Students even added that Robert's Rules

assisted in their public speaking skills and confidence. On the other hand, Robert's Rules were

viewed as not favoring unpopular opinions, a participation barrier, and a method which does not

uplift underrepresented voices. Concisely put by Jesse, "students' concerns do actually get really

debated here. But then in other situations . . . they're just kind of dismissed."

Senators defined underrepresented voices in different ways, first year senators, members

of the public (i.e., non-senators), and historically underrepresented identities. As previously

mentioned, one of the senators alluded to the potential barrier of participation that first year

senators may face, which inhibits the senate space to have the knowledge that is missing from

these senator's constituent experiences. Members of the public may not feel inclined to

participate in senate meetings because they are unsure how to navigate the rules in the senate

space. Historically underrepresented voices were mentioned as when they are in the space to

ensure that senators are asking questions and recognizing that the rules are a barrier to

participation for students, who may be already experiencing societal and systemic pressures.

What was shared throughout this question is proof that Robert's Rules favor the majority voice

and creates a barrier for anyone who is not familiar with the rules and interacting with the space.

Even though Robert's was not deemed the best option, senators did not believe that

Martha's Rules were any better. Due to senate meetings size and its lack of structure. Though the

dichotomy between the strengths of Robert's Rules and the growth points of Martha's Rules, and

vice versa, was a prevalent theme brought up. The most prevailing take on what senators wanted

changed in Robert's Rules were about the timing aspect of the meetings, the voting, and the

formality of the space. Lastly, senators benefitted from reflection opportunities in the project, which was one of the purposes—specifically, for senators to question the system they perpetuate.

Summary of Cycle Results and Findings

Throughout the cycles, senators explained the dichotomy between Robert's and Martha's Rules, recognized that while Robert's Rules may be helpful in facilitating that it is not helpful with collaboration, appreciated the openness of Martha's Rules, and found Robert's Rules to not uplift underrepresented voices. From the survey, intriguing data points remain to be the agreement to wanting to use Robert's Rules, the agreeing to wanting a new parliamentary method, and the absence of first year senator participation. Also, the most ideal meeting was mentioned to have an agenda and timing. Moving forward, knowing the importance of structure to the meeting, senators voiced they wanted to change aspects of Robert's Rules (timing, voting, and formality) and have a different Robert's Rules training in the future.

Reflections on Personal Experiences

As previously mentioned, I was in student government as an undergraduate student. It is interesting reflecting on my first year in student government and this project because they mirror each other. During the project, the lack of first-year representation during senate meetings was brought up. Connecting this to my personal experience with Robert's Rules, as first year senator, my experiences were in alignment with this group. As mentioned in our research courses, this research is most likely closely connected to us and our experiences, I am connected in a different way than I expected. Another reflection is that upon beginning this project, I was unsure of my abilities to facilitate a project on Robert's Rules, due to not being an expert in using the rules. Though after putting my project into perspective, I learned that my role within this project was to

understand other's experiences with the rules. While I related to what students expressed around their experience with the rules, I had the passion to conduct and propose ways to improve how my students operate in their meetings.

I am thankful to have had the opportunity to learn along the ASG senators, and uplift their voices and opinions through this research—I will continue to carry this with me as a professional moving forward. In addition, at moments during this project I encountered challenges, such as lack of participation for my first cycle. At some points, I believed I would have no more than a few participants. Due to my advisor and supervisors support, they encouraged me to become more creative with my recruitment approach. This led me to gather more participants and ultimately provide results that I felt confident in due to the amount of participation I gathered. From my action research I learned during the process that it is important to lean on my support system when I feel discouraged, as I had to here when I was having difficulty gathering participants. This is a takeaway I will consider to apply to my time moving forward in higher education, as it is crucial to have a support system.

Limitations

The limitations during my project were—recruitment, time, and lack of representation. Recruitment was difficult at first, and throughout the cycles. Recognizing that my research was with a busy group of students who are involved in many activities across campus, recruitment and time were bound to be limitations from the start. It would have been helpful if there was participation from half of the senate, to ensure there was adequate representation. Through each cycle, the participants decreased, from 12 to eight to four. Additionally, there was a lack of representation from certain identity groups, like first year senators and students, students of

various races and ethnicities, non-binary students, male-identified students, students who are part of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community, and students who are religious or spiritual. Other than race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion, and spirituality, there were no other identities mentioned from the senators, which leaves many identities unreported (i.e., socioeconomic status, nationality, disability, age, etc.). Lastly, another limitation was that there was a lack of prior research on Robert's Rules and its use in college and university student government settings. This made it difficult to have a baseline for what to specifically research.

Recommendations

These recommendations are intended for those who are involved with ASG senators—the SAI staff, the senate lead team, and the executive branch. The amount of change that can be created based on these recommendations are dependent on the group. For example, the training that students are provided is through the SAI staff and they were provided their own recommendations for split Robert's Rules training for first year senators and returning senators (see Appendix E). I also ensured that my graduate assistant transition documents included my recommendations so the next person in my role can consider my findings in their work. In addition to the SAI training recommendations, there were general recommendations, referred to as best practices, for increasing senate communication, and the sheet was provided to SAI, senate lead team, and executive branch (see Appendix F). The recommendations to improve senate communication are as follows: implementing a hybrid meeting modality (a mix of Robert's Rules with other desired characteristics), technical Robert's Rules edit considerations, and increasing open communication.

Hybrid meeting modality:

- Use Robert's Rules as an outline for rules, and implement changes to the rules that are specific for ASG, making a hybrid meeting method. For example, use Robert's Rules with other desired meeting characteristics in the technical considerations sections.

  - Senators should be well-informed of the different meeting modalities and why Robert's Rules is what is used for their senate meetings.

Technical Robert's Rules edit considerations:

- Agenda (structure of the meeting) and timing are the two most important aspects.

  - Multiple senators endorsed changing how timing is done. Overall, the most common idea was to make it more difficult to extend time.

- Voting

  - Majority vote is the favored quota for voting. Martha's Rules voting was also liked.

    - Martha's Rules voting: consensus based voting. The pre vote options for voting are: like it, can live with it, and uncomfortable with it (Minahan, 1986).

- Formality

  - Senators did not enjoy the formality in the space all of the time—for example, the reference of "senator" before someone's name they go by.

Increasing open communication:

- Supporting underrepresented voices (first year senators, historically underrepresented students, and non-senators)

  - Splitting first year senator and returning senator Robert's Rules training

- In this project, a lack of first year participation during the senate meetings was mentioned (see Appendix E).

- Recognizing the different barriers that historically underrepresented students may face within engaging with the senate space and Robert's Rules (i.e., a student advocates for something during a senate meeting, how does the senate respond with the rules?).

- Implement a public input time section at the beginning and end of the meeting. It is recommended that the have clear times they can engage in the space.

- Meeting space

  - Consider changing the seating in the senate meeting space to encourage different members of senate to communicate and get to know each other.

Conclusion

Through this project, there were many themes that were brought up around communication, Robert's Rules, and Martha's Rules. This action research project demonstrated the influence that Robert's Rules has on senators and how they show up in the space. It also showed that while Robert's Rules is structured, there is an openness to try a different parliamentary procedure. The topic around underrepresented voices not being honored in the space emerged multiple times—whether that is people who are historically underrepresented, first year senators, or members of the public (non-senators). Robert's Rules operates in a way that elevated the majority voice, which is evident through learning of some of the students experiences with the rules. Despite senators dislike of a flawed meeting method exhibited in the focus groups, they came back around to defend and understand why it was used in the first place: the structure, the platform, the fairness, and its universality. Martha's Rules were also a

controversial meeting method to introduce as it was free flowing, consensus-based, and had a different voting system—though the students preferred Robert's to Martha's. This is what created the idea for a hybrid model of methods since there is no perfect meeting method.

Additionally, there was one measurement for this study from beginning to end, which was to calculate if senators had an increase in participation. For three of four participants who were part of all cycles, their participation increased in senate meetings comparing participation prior to the project to their participation after the project. Reflecting on this method now, this was an unsatisfactory indicator of participation because engagement may increase or decrease on any given day with the topics discussed. Also, since there has not been an official change in the senate space to the recommendations I put forth, there is no method to measure that the increase was due to my project changes specifically. Overall, I recommend that the ASG senate continues to use Robert's Rules only if there is an openness to implementing changes within the rules. Senators main job is to represent their constituents in the senate space, even though they may personally benefit from Robert's Rules, there are things that can be done to better theirs and others abilities to advocate within the space and communicate more effectively with one another.

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List of Tables

Appendix A

Recruitment Flyer

Volunteers Needed for Action Research Project about Senate Communication

I am conducting an action research project that's purpose is to understand how Associate Student Government Senators communicate with one another during their senate meetings. This action research hopes to increase senators participation in the senate space and remove any potential barriers to participation. I would like to invite you to participate in this study titled "Should we move to suspend Robert's rules forever: A review and proposal for student government communication."

You may qualify if you are:
- 18 years of age or older
- A Senator in Associated Student Government (ASG) at the University of San Diego

Location:
In-person at University of San Diego or online.

Time commitment:
is 3 hours. All responses will be audio recorded.

Participation Includes:
- Focus Groups
- Survey
- Semi-Structured Interview

Compensation:
If you participate in the study, you will be given a $25 Target Gift Card via email. You will receive this compensation even if you decide not to complete the entire study.

Please contact Harper Estus at hestus@sandiego.edu for more information.

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Appendix B

Recruitment Email

Subject: Department of Leadership Studies: Participant Invitation

Body of Email:

Hello ASG Senators,

I hope this email finds you well. My name is Harper Estus and I am a Graduate Student in the School of Leadership and Education Sciences at the University of San Diego. I am conducting a project named "Should we move to suspend Robert's rules forever: A review and proposal for student government communication ."

The purpose of this project is to understand and improve how student leaders within student government (senators) communicate with one another during their senate meetings. This project hopes to increase senators participation in the senate space and remove any potential barriers to participation.

I am doing this project to gather better insight into how you all use parliamentary procedures to communicate with one another. Your participation as an ASG Senator is imperative for my project and in general for looking at ASG and its processes with a critical lens.

The time commitment is 3 hours. All responses will be audio recorded.

Please note:

- Participation in this project 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. <u>You can withdraw from this project at any time without penalty.</u>
- At the conclusion of this project, you will be sent a $25 Target Gift Card via email, even if you were unable to complete the entire project.
- Sometimes when people are asked to think about their feelings, they feel sad or anxious. If you would like to talk to someone about your feelings at any time, you can call toll-free, 24 hours a day: San Diego Mental Health Hotline at 1-800-479-3339

Please email me (Harper Estus) at hestus@sandiego.edu if you have any questions, would like more information, or if you are interested in participating. You can also contact my advisor, Dr. Cheryl Getz at cgetz@sandiego.edu.

Thank you for your consideration,
Harper Estus
She, Her, Hers
Master's in Higher Education Leadership Candidate (2024)
Graduate Assistant, Student Activities and Involvement
University of San Diego

Appendix C

Cycle 1: Focus Group Activities

Activity 1

- Draw 2 pictures
- One of what the senate space symbolizes for you.
- One of what Robert's Rules symbolizes for you. Please add descriptions.

Activity 2

- Discussion on the following:
  - How do Robert's Rules help facilitate your participation in senate meetings?
  - How do Robert's Rules help you collaborate with other senators in senate meetings?

Activity 3

- Teaching & Using Martha's rules
  - Teaching Martha's rules
  - Using Martha's rules
    - Have the group solve 1 item with Martha's Rules: Create a proposal(s) for how ASG can increase food accessibility on USD's campus.

Activity 4

- Pros & Cons of Robert's and Martha's rules
  - Robert's rules pro (5 min)
  - Robert's rules con (5 min)
  - Martha's rues pro (5 min)
  - Martha's rules con (5 min)

Activity 5

- Sticky Note Activity & post to corresponding sheet:
  - Yellow sticky note: What did you learn today?
  - Blue sticky note: What is something from today that you would like to take forward in the Senate meeting space?

Focus Group Activities

Appendix D

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

1. Explain your idea of an ideal meeting. What are the different moving parts that need to be thought about when planning and running a meeting?

    a. If not mentioned, ask about the following parts:

        i. Agenda, time boundaries, time limits on specific areas of the meeting, language used in the meeting, and voting.

2. Based on the last question, do you feel that the way the senate meeting uses Robert's Rules contributes to the outcome of the meeting? If not, why? If yes, in what ways?

3. How has your participation in Senate meetings been encouraged by Robert's Rules? If so, in what ways? Alternatively, how (if at all) has your participation in Senate meetings been limited by Robert's Rules?

4. How has your development in Associated Student Government (ASG) been encouraged by Robert's Rules? If so, in what ways? Alternatively, how (if at all) has your development in ASG been limited by Robert's Rules?

5. Do you think ASG promotes uplifting underrepresented voices in a senate meeting using Robert's Rules? If yes, in what ways? If not, what do you think may be an issue or concern that is not promoted or uplifted?

6. When did you first learn about Robert's Rules?

    a. Explain your knowledge of Robert's Rules when you first joined ASG to now. How do you feel about using Robert's Rules now in comparison to then?

7. After Cycle 1 and Cycle 2, Do you feel like Martha's Rules is an effective method of parliamentary procedure for senate meetings? If yes, how does this method compare to Robert's Rules? If not, why do you think this?

8. If you could change the current ASG meeting structure, which is Robert's Rules, would you change anything about it moving forward? If so, what suggestions do you have?

9. Do you have any last thoughts regarding this study?

10. Any questions?

Appendix E

Robert's Rules Training Recommendations Provided to the SAI Staff

Through my Action Research Project researching senate communication and Robert's Rules, it was found that it would be beneficial to modify the Robert's Rules training at ASG Training. During my project, there were mentions of a lack of first year participation during senate meetings and generally, there was a lack of first year senator participation in this project. With that data, I hope you will consider a solution that one of the senators mentioned during the project—splitting up the Robert's Rules training for first year senators and returning senators. Below are the recommendations that I hope you consider moving forward:

- Split up first year senators and returning senators for the Robert's Rules training
    - First year senators training should cover the basics of Robert's Rules and go through two practices of Robert's Rules for a senate meeting—the first practice is only first year senators and the second practice will have the returning senators join.
        - The current training SAI provided for senators can be modified.
            - The presentation should be adapted for the two different senate meeting practices—the first year senator practice should go through the whole meeting as the training already does. For the full team practice, everyone should go through a few new business items.
            - Due to the lack of first year senators and the mention of the lack of first year voice in senate in my AR, I recommend to mention that

messing up is okay and part of the process of learning. This was a concern that was expressed.

- Includes why Robert's Rules are used and how to take up their role in senate.

- Returning Senators training should take place at the same time as the first year senator's Robert's Rules training, but they should focus on resolution writing or review transition documents during this time.

    - After doing their activity, they will join the first year senator Robert's Rules training for the full team practice through a few new business items.

Appendix F

Best Practices for Increasing Senate Communication

- Hybrid meeting modality

    - Use Robert's Rules as an outline for rules, and implement changes to the rules that are specific for ASG (such as aspects from the below). The results were very close, though students were more for a new parliamentary procedure than continue with Robert's Rules. Senators should be well-informed of the different meeting modalities and why Robert's Rules is what is used.

- Agenda (structure of the meeting) and timing are the two most important aspects.

    - How timing is done in meetings was encouraged by multiple senators to change. The most common ideas were to make it more difficult to extend time.

- Voting

    - Majority vote is favored; Martha's Rules voting was also liked.

        - Martha's Rules voting: consensus based voting. The pre vote options for voting are: like it, can live with it, and uncomfortable with it (Minahan, 1986). It was mentioned that generally Martha's Rules would be helpful for smaller groups such as the senate committees.

- Formality

    - Senators did not enjoy the formality in the space all of the time—for example, the reference of "senator" before someone's name they go by.

- Supporting underrepresented voices

- Splitting first year senator and returning senator Robert's Rules training (this input was provided to the SAI team).

    - Also includes why Robert's Rules are used and how to take up their role in senate

- Recognizing the different barriers that historically underrepresented students may face within engaging with the senate space and Robert's Rules (i.e., a student advocates for something during a senate meeting, how does the senate respond or how can senators respond through Robert's Rules?).

- Implement a public input time section at the beginning and end of the meeting. Due to the public being identified as one of the underrepresented voices in the space, it is recommended that the have clear times they can engage in the space.

- Meeting space

    - Consider changing the seating in the senate meeting space to encourage different members of senate to communicate and get to know each other. Currently, senators are seated next to the same individuals every meeting, which causes them to not interact with other senators.