

2010

The politics of higher education and the student presidency

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The politics of higher education and the student presidency

Abstract

The student body president is an advocate, spokesperson, figurehead and leader. The student presidency is a role that few get to experience and many do not understand. I have found that in my four years involved with student government at Eastern Michigan University and my recent interviews with several other student body presidents across the state that the power associated with an administration can vary greatly, but the nature of the office remains intact. Attempts were made to interview each of the student body presidents at the fifteen state sponsored universities in the state of Michigan. These student body presidents from the 2009 - 2010 academic school year were surveyed regarding the election process, nature and duties of their office and the long-term institutions of student government at their respective schools. The responding schools included Wayne State University, University of Michigan Dearborn, University of Michigan Flint, and Saginaw Valley 3 State University. These public institutions represent diversity in both the size of the student body (ranging from 8,500 students to 33,000 students) and the demographics of the student body. Additional information was obtained through the interview of former student body presidents of Eastern Michigan University. Through my own experience and that of my peers, I intend to highlight the ways that the student presidency contains many parallels to the United States' own political institutions. From determining viable candidacy to maintaining continuity after administration changes, the world of university student governments is a microcosm of the American political system.

Degree Type

Open Access Senior Honors Thesis

Department

Political Science

Subject Categories

Higher Education Administration | Political Science

THE POLITICS OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND THE STUDENT PRESIDENCY

By

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A Senior Thesis Submitted to the

Eastern Michigan University

Honors College

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for Graduation

with Honors in Political Science

Approved at Ypsilanti Michigan, on this date _____

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Honors Thesis

Winter 2010

The Politics of Higher Education and the Student Presidency

I do solemnly affirm that I will faithfully execute the duties of the office to which I have been elected and will, to the best of my ability: preserve, protect, and defend the rights and interests of the student body of Eastern Michigan University.

The Oath of EMU Student Government

The student body president is an advocate, spokesperson, figurehead and leader. The student presidency is a role that few get to experience and many do not understand. I have found that in my four years involved with student government at Eastern Michigan University and my recent interviews with several other student body presidents across the state that the power associated with an administration can vary greatly, but the nature of the office remains intact. Attempts were made to interview each of the student body presidents at the fifteen state sponsored universities in the state of Michigan. These student body presidents from the 2009 - 2010 academic school year were surveyed regarding the election process, nature and duties of their office and the long-term institutions of student government at their respective schools. The responding schools included Wayne State University, University of Michigan Dearborn, University of Michigan Flint, and Saginaw Valley

State University. These public institutions represent diversity in both the size of the student body (ranging from 8,500 students to 33,000 students) and the demographics of the student body. Additional information was obtained through the interview of former student body presidents of Eastern Michigan University. Through my own experience and that of my peers, I intend to highlight the ways that the student presidency contains many parallels to the United States' own political institutions. From determining viable candidacy to maintaining continuity after administration changes, the world of university student governments is a microcosm of the American political system.

I. Candidacy

As with most political position in the state and federal government, competitive candidates for the student body elections are predominantly from certain demographics. When national party leadership selects their probable candidates for president they consider their political and professional experience, their popularity, effectiveness as a public speaker and their ability to raise money for the campaign among other criteria based on the party. Overall, the defining characteristic of a good candidate is the ability to be elected. While no student governments in the state of Michigan maintain political parties, you will find that many of these criteria can also determine an effective candidate for student body elections.

Although technically any student is eligible to run for student body president, it takes a certain kind of student to have a decent shot (or so history tells us). Many undergraduate students are only at their respective universities for an average of

four years, spending most of that time focusing on their degrees. The call to serve the student body appears to be something that is inherent in some students as soon as they come to campus. Shahad Atiya, Student Body President of UofM Dearborn recalls, "My vice president and I decided to run for our positions the day we joined student government as incoming freshmen who petitioned in late in our first fall semester on campus. After a few years of ups and downs, we decided to seriously do it our junior year. " Planning several years in advance for a run at the presidency seems to be the norm for most leaders that plan on having a comprehensive campaign. Often, these ambitious students work their way up in the Student Government or Student Assembly system. James Gale, current president of the Wayne State Student Association served as the speaker of the house before his run for president. At Eastern, the past six out of seven presidents have been elected immediately after serving as a standing committee director. A long history of cabinet members becoming successfully elected leads to the conclusion that these individuals possess an almost incumbent advantage.

In the context of student representation, political experience is determined through time served in various representative organizations and the extent of a candidate's personal connection with university administration. For me, the greatest advantage in our campaign was my previous bid for the presidency. A campaign that essentially lasted two years gave me name recognition both among the student body, and within administrative and professional circles within the university. Obviously those with active participation in previous legislation passed by the senate also often have physical results to back up their political claims. This

makes it harder (but not impossible) for students without a history of involvement to break into the realm of executive candidacy. Owen Agho and Ryan Kanine, Presidents of U of M Flint and Saginaw Valley State University respectively, both ran as incumbents for the executive ticket and found this experience to be invaluable in determining their overwhelming success in that year's elections.

Although not an intuitive determinant of success for student campaigns, both time and fiscal resources are important for a successful campaign. Out of the student presidents that were surveyed for this project, only one individual said that they were able to hold a non-student government part time job during the elections. For the rest of us, campaign season was a full time job in itself with no time for outside employment. Many students do not have the ability to take a month or more off of work, and this gives them a significant disadvantage. Owen Agho, two-time president of U of M Flint's Student assembly said that "gathering the money necessary to run a successful campaign was the single biggest obstacle for me". Fundraising is a critical piece of bid for the U.S. presidency as well. Sufficient amounts of money allow candidates to advertise and promote issue positions, expand their campaign organizations, and develop other activities necessary for winning the nomination of their party, and the subsequent national elections. (Damore, D.). Fundraising early in the campaign is often much easier for established candidates, due to their name recognition and their ability to offer proven results to potential donors. Since incumbents have such an advantage in fundraising ability, it is no shock that some of the few new candidates that are successful in their campaigns have significant personal wealth of their own.

Unsurprisingly, time and fiscal resources go hand in hand. Since most candidates for student body president are required to be enrolled full time at their respective institutions, those that run for student body president tend to be good students. Only those with a solid academic standing really have the ability to undertake such a huge time commitment effectively. The course load and subject of study each seem to greatly affect the ability for a given student to run in the election. It appears from this group that more presidents come from social sciences than the lab based sciences.

Another important determinant for a successful campaign is the candidate's popularity and name recognition across campus. Small sample Those that have a broad range of involvement in academic organizations, greek life and service are often the most successful in the election. Some of the best United States presidential candidates are those that have survived in the professional world, have financial expertise, and have government and military experience. Similarly, a diverse background in university programs and clubs are fundamental to gain the support of many different groups of students.

Finally, before announcing candidacy, every presidential hopeful must select a running mate. Whether the candidate is running for president of the most powerful nation in the world or just the most powerful student position on campus, the selection of a suitable running mate is a point of much speculation before official campaigns are announced. Although usually achieving significantly less publicity and name recognition, the running mate can be substantially beneficial when branding the ticket to potential voters. Typically, vice presidential candidates "fly

under the radar” and have little effect on the overall choice of a voter at the polls. In the 2008 election however, the vice presidential candidates, particularly Sarah Palin, seemed to gain an unusual amount of media attention. Feelings about Palin exhibited one of the largest impacts on vote choice of any Republican vice presidential candidate since 1972. (Ulbig, S.) In contrast, feelings about Democratic vice presidential candidate Joe Biden, seemed to have typically little impact on voting choice. In the realm of student body elections, the ideal running mate is a balance of both gaining diverse voters and finding someone that you can spend over 60 hours a week with for the next year and a half. The same criteria that make a good president apply here: fundamentally seeking a balance between the candidates to appeal to the broadest range of voters. Once the running mate is selected, it is time for the campaign team to form in preparation for the general election season.

II. The Election

The backbone of any successful vie for the presidency is the campaign team. For each type of candidate, this means surrounding yourself with the smartest, most dedicated, loyal and energetic group that you can find. These individuals are often the largest determinant in a successful campaign on any level. They help the candidate formulate positions on the issues and sometimes represent the candidates when they cannot be there in person. In the 2008 US Presidential elections, the campaign team for Barack Obama seemed to make few mistakes when campaigning for their novel candidate. An article from the New York Times noted that the “McCain campaign team often seemed to make missteps and lurch from

moment to moment in search of a consistent strategy and message, while the disciplined and nimble Obama team marched through a presidential contest of historic intensity learning to exploit opponents' weaknesses and making remarkably few stumbles" (Nagourney et al.). While there were many other factors at work to separate the two candidates at the time, the Obama campaign team was vital in taking advantage of the mistakes made by the McCain camp in order to turn the tide of the race leading up to Election Day.

For those prominent leaders that cannot donate their time to a campaign team, endorsements are also essential to secure. In respect to the student body races optimal endorsements may range from the Residence Hall Association President to the captain of the football team. These individual backings by other student leaders and groups are just as important as interest group support for U.S. Presidential candidates. For example, for each political party within the U.S. there are key interest groups that are almost essential to a successful bid at the primary, and the subsequent national election. For Republicans, these special interest groups often include those representing businesses, right to life groups and the NRA, while Democrats usually have the support of labor unions and environmental groups just to name a few. Endorsements from a wide variety of interest groups bring in pools of voters that may have proved impossible to identify with otherwise and are vital to a campaign that hopes to appeal to a broad range of constituents.

Throughout the duration of the campaign, the obstacles that candidates for president face are both numerous and multi faceted. The most prominent of these on both a national and university level seem to be low voter turnout and constituent

apathy. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in the 2008 election only about 64% of the voting age population participated in the general election. While this is a significant step up from the participation of the student bodies in the state, it is still disappointing for a candidate to represent so many individuals that do not vote. Out of the five different Michigan public universities polled, all reported between a 5-10% voter turn out of their student population. With both constituencies, those that don't vote are often those that need the most representation. In terms of the United States, citizens in inner cities, the poor, the working, the under educated are the least likely to come to the polls and most likely to be deserving of a strong advocate. In a University setting the deserving groups are represented by international students, commuters, untraditional students that do not have the time or desire to vote – these are often the student populations that could most likely benefit from the resources and new initiatives that strong student leadership could provide.

Another substantial problem that candidates in both political arenas face is that of negative campaigning and mudslinging. This form of particular form of campaigning usually contains attacks meant to destroy a candidate's character, personality, or opinion. Some voters and politicians look down on this type of strategy because it often detracts the public's attention from the substantive issues of the election. Often, it is associated with a particular party, or an individual candidate, but a comparison of recent U.S. presidential elections indicates a significant trend in the prevalence of negative campaigning. In an analysis done by Cambridge University in 2003, it was found that in all six of the runaway elections from 1960 to 2000, without exception, the ticket that trailed significantly out

attacked its opponent (Siegalman, Lee). Unsurprisingly, political bashing is prevalent in almost all races for the student body presidency. Student Body President Atiya of the University of Michigan Dearborn says that “The biggest obstacle that we faced was negative campaigning that ranged from flat out lies to propaganda that was created just to deter students from considering our platform and candidacy”. Negative campaigning can be combated with reciprocal mudslinging or by continued redirection of the public toward the policy issues of the election.

For candidates that are either incumbent or seeking the presidency immediately following another term in office, the balancing act of time management can be a daunting one. While they have the advantage of boasting pertinent political experience, often come election time the office to which they are currently elected becomes neglected. In terms Student Government, neglect of current positions is especially prevalent during election season while trying to balance classes. This absenteeism from current positions held is seen on a federal level as well. In recent years, U.S. presidents have devoted increasing amounts of their time, which is perhaps their scarcest resource, to the task of raising funds to advance their own political interests and those of their party. Many observers have decried this trend as part of what has been dubbed a permanent campaign for the presidency, in which little distinction now remains between campaigning and governing (Damore, D.). This can be problematic to many constituents that feel that they are not being properly represented in the office to which the presidential hopeful is currently elected.

A final aspect of the election process that must be considered when comparing the two presidential races is the external oversight and regulation of the elections. Most student government elections are regulated by an election commission that is charged with the fair and unbiased supervision of the election proceedings. Often a Dean of Students or a Student Government advisor also advises this body. When a grievance is filed, it is imperative that the issue is dealt with swiftly and appropriately, in order to prevent mistrust among voters, and maintain the legitimacy of the eventual victor. In terms of the US presidential election, the Federal Election Commission oversees the election, with the Supreme Court stepping in to rule in times of controversy. Fair oversight is essential in order to have legitimate election, and the ramifications that can occur when the public doubts the election results can be seen in the 2000 presidential elections. Newly elected president George W. Bush's victory was less than glamorous as a result of the historically close vote totals in Florida, which required multiple recounts. Many say that this robbed President Bush of the "honeymoon" period often afforded many presidents when they first come into office. Conversely, when an election is run smoothly with the victor achieving election a measurable margin, the President elect is rewarded with the increased productivity that comes with such victory. For U.S Presidents this time period is often the first hundred days, for a Student Body President, this means the summer after the election, when senate is in recess and the new executives have the most time to interact and lobby administration. This momentum of popularity immediately following the election can be used to achieve

policy changes that could have faced more roadblocks later in the president's tenure.

III. The Presidency

One of the first tasks of a newly elected president is to appoint his or her cabinet. Analogous to the campaign team, this group of individuals should be some of the best and brightest in their respective fields. Some likely appointees may even be former opponents over the course of the election. The most notable recent example of this is President Barack Obama's appointment of Hillary Clinton as Secretary of State. For student governments, it is often a conciliatory measure to appoint the major losing ticket to cabinet positions. These individuals usually have a proven interest in the betterment of the organization, and acquiring their alliance can help to forgo any potential factionalization that may otherwise occur within the student senate. Both on a university and federal level, all cabinet appointments made by the President and Vice President must be also be confirmed by the senate. Additionally in both arenas, the presidents are held accountable for the failures of their subordinates, making the appointment process of utmost importance. For a Student Body President, the correct appointment of a Director of Business and Finance is fundamental to secure the proper handling of budgets that are often over \$250, 000. In regards to federal appointments, the inadequate response of FEMA director Michael Brown to the damage of hurricane Katrina left many pointing fingers at the Bush Administration for the many cases of human suffering reported

in New Orleans. This instance highlights just how influential the correct appointment of these positions can be on the success and legacy of a particular administration.

With a complete executive team, the president must gain the allegiance of the ever-fickle legislative and judiciary branches. By constitutional design (whether U.S. or Student Government) the three branches of government keep each other in check. No matter how great a single president may be as an individual, the condition and balance of the senate and judiciary they inherent determine their fate at least as much as their ability as a leader does. While the President may speak on behalf of the country (or student body), they are reliant upon the legislative branch to turn their policy goals into reality. The separation of powers between the branches is something that must absolutely be maintained from administration to administration, despite other reforms of the constitution and governing documents over time. As Attorney General William Mitchell once put it: "Since the organization of the Government, Presidents have felt bound to insist upon the maintenance of the Executive functions unimpaired by legislative encroachment, just as the legislative branch has felt bound to resist interferences with its power by the Executive. To acquiesce in legislation having a tendency to encroach upon the executive authority results in establishing dangerous precedents" (Dellinger). The president must be able to leave their office with a balance of steadfast leadership (while avoiding tyranny) and legislative support (without losing strong policy).

Seeking the continuity of the federal court system, often the judicial branch of student governments are elected on a calendar year schedule as opposed to the academic year schedule followed by the Senate and executive teams. This allows the individual greater freedom to act without undue influence of the legislative and executive branches. Since it is the duty of the Judiciary to uphold the constitution, it is important for them to be able to make rulings free of political bias in this way. On a grander scale, federal appointments to the Supreme Court are life long in hopes that the justices will also be free from the influence of the changing Washington politics. The Supreme Court's decisions interpreting the constitutional separation of powers among Congress, the President, and the courts recognize the founders' basic concern over the "encroaching nature" of power (Dellinger). These principles hold true to the smaller scale of Student Government and its judicial branch led by the Judicial Sergeant.

When asked what their biggest obstacle to a productive presidency was, every student body president interviewed reported that term limits were the biggest problem. The single-year term of each president interviewed make long term planning for an organization difficult, and requires focused leadership from the president in order to complete a substantial project. Without unanimity in a given student government, passing extensive legislation or tackling large-scale projects becomes extremely difficult and wastes valuable time. As president Atiya from the University of Michigan Dearborn disappointedly reflects, "The politics within our organization ended up getting between members' productivity throughout the year. By the time they figured out that the bickering is meaningless and only brings down

the organization, it was time for elections again.” The previous discussion regarding the balance of power among the different branches of the government becomes even more important in the light of a brief term in office. Even if the president has substantial support from the legislature, the brevity of the term can still be a major detriment to completing initiatives. Ryan Kanine of Saginaw Valley State University wishes he had more time in his position to continue work on the large projects of his administration: “Looking back, I wish I had run for President during my junior year so that I could serve for two years. This year has been such a learning experience and I see so many things that I wish I would have done differently. It’s frustrating because sometimes you only get one shot at doing something. One year goes by really fast and when you have so many responsibilities and goals to accomplish it’s really difficult to focus on everything.” Here Ryan points out there are often no second chances to achieve success on a major project. While the administration of a United States president may be remembered by a war, natural disaster or major policy change in health care, so too is a student body president’s administration often marked by a single event. Likely these could take shape as the student response to a faculty strike, offering new resources to students, or advocating for a freeze on tuition. Student body presidents usually have the time and political capital to only complete one or two major projects during their terms. As a result, one of the most valuable leadership qualities that a president can possess is an effective method of prioritizing the goals of the administration.

Even with effective prioritization and focused leadership from the president, many still fall subject to the period in office when they become a “lame duck” to the

legislature. This phenomenon occurs when approaching the end of the president's tenure, and especially once a successor has already been elected. The status as a lame duck can occur after losing a bid for re-election, choosing not to seek another term, or as a result of term limits. No matter the level of government on which the elected official is participating, term limits greatly affect the ability of the president to influence legislation. As the president reaches the end of their term, their political power wanes as they lose the ability to influence policy. In a public university setting, this concept is illustrated by administrative bodies that ignore a student's demands until they are out of office. On a federal level this means that the legislature can wait until the president is out of office to pass legislation that may have previously had a threat of veto. The debate surrounding term limits stretches back to the time of Jefferson and Hamilton when political thinkers of the time sought to balance the needs of ensuring stability within the government and the fear of recreating the tyrannical monarchy. The tradition that presidents would serve a maximum of two terms was eventually codified by the 22nd amendment. The 22nd amendment was passed in 1947 by a largely partisan effort to ensure that the president could not assert the authority to run for more than two terms. The framers wanted to promote the most effective leadership possible and recognized "the connection between the selection process, tenure of office, and the ability of the president to fulfill these functions" (Crockett). Although term limits were left out of the constitution much thought was given as to how to make the office of the president powerful enough to lead the workings of the government and fulfill their role of commander in chief, while still keeping proper balance between the

executive branch and congress. When analyzing this goal today in terms of the constitution it becomes apparent, “the question of term limits and presidential effectiveness is important not because of the president's desire to be successful by winning specific policy battles or getting his way, but because the various functions of the office are important for the effectiveness of republican government in general. The qualities provided by energetic leadership and clerkship--the broader goals of security and stability--ideally should not be contingent upon election cycles and duration in office” (Crockett). This reasoning has led lawmakers over time to enumerate the limitation of two terms for the office of the president. Unfortunately for most student body presidents, a second term is not an option due to graduation and so focus and determination becomes even more important as their term is waning into the “lame duck” period.

IV. External Factors and Interest Groups

Once elected, many factors outside of the government offices affect the success of a given president's administration. Often a president's political capital and influence on the legislature are directly measured by the president's public approval throughout their term. Numerous scholarly studies on the nature of presidential approval have arisen due to the growing abundance of media outlets by which voters can digest political news. As a result of this growing influence of the media on the political capital of the president, a positive relationship with the various outlets is also of greater importance to presidents in the past few decades. Political scholars that study this relationship say, “In the era of the public relations

presidency, approval ratings play a critical role in presidential politics. The president's performance in this "new referendum" is a key to understanding presidential power in the postwar era" (Gronke). Additionally, historical comparison shows that "higher approval ratings tend to pay off electorally, both for the president and for his party in Congress and also affect the president's policymaking goals, legislative strategy, and success in promoting his agenda" (Gronke). As a result of these trends, presidents place greater importance and more resources than ever before on media interactions.

For student body presidents, a positive relationship with the school newspaper and the communications staff of the university can dictate success or failure on some of the largest projects that an administration undertakes. James Gale, president at Wane State University this year describes the dynamic as "a love-hate relationship". Each public university in the state of Michigan has a student newspaper, and a strong relationship with this paper is often one of the most important partnerships a student body president can form early in their term. Ryan Kanine discusses his administration's interaction with the various media outlets at Saginaw Valley State University:

"We have a good relationship with our school newspaper. Their office is just right across the hall from us so we interact with them frequently. I think they do a good job reporting on us whether its praise or criticism. I also have a pretty close relationship with our university's Public Relations Officer so we have a good relationship with the local news (both print and television).

Other individuals at our university operate their own independent newspaper. They have caused quite a bit of stress in trying to write up controversial stories on our organization. They use Facebook as a main source for his stories and even took a status of mine that said “I think I’m getting the flu” and turned it into a story that said “Kanine May Have H1N1 Flu Virus.” That group has definitely made things interesting this year.”

The mix of positive and negative reporting on the workings of the Saginaw Valley State University Student government is not uncommon to other student governments across the state. The public checks that university student newspapers provide are one of the most significant motivations to keep student government members motivated throughout the year. Ryan’s comments about the seemingly outrageous accusations from alternative media sources have outcomes similar to those that may be released about the United States President. Many of the most common tabloid headlines seek to detail some way in which the president is unfit to lead. Some readers may use this information to discredit the president while others simply ignore it. The goal for any president that is subject to this kind of press is to make sure those positive articles and interviews are just as accessible to the public as the negative press.

In addition to compromising and negotiating with the legislature, the president is also subject to other representative bodies that seek to influence policy-making. In the university setting the interest groups that a student body president most often has to work with take the form of the faculty, administrative officials, and other representative student bodies and councils. Although these groups represent

the influential bodies that the president must negotiate with in order to complete many projects, it is up to the president to what degree that they influence the internal work of the government. There are many advantages in having positive working relationships with these groups. “One major advantage that the support of interest groups has for an executive department is that such groups can often do for a department things that it cannot easily do for itself” (Yackee). In terms of student governments, the university “interest groups” can provide support to bring about large changes in university policy and can also provide expertise on certain areas of weakness in the university system that a student government initiative may improve upon. James Gale, student body president at Wayne State University describes his relationship with the faculty at his school as a beneficial one: “The faculty senate agrees with us on almost everything and they share most student concerns and agree that we need to do something about them. Sometimes they help us develop a method of moving forward on a particular issue and this often makes a more convincing case when we bring the issue to administration.” Additionally, other scholars suggest “interest groups help bureaucrats sway public opinion, raise awareness concerning policy issues facing agencies, secure budgets, resist political control and assist agencies when they disagree with presidential directives” (Yackee). In the federal system interest groups play an even more substantial role in policy shaping. The expertise that interest groups provide to law-makers is often essential to the shaping of policy by funding and conducting studies, providing public feedback and developing cost estimates regarding new legislation. However sometimes it seems that special interest groups maintain too much sway over the

president and congress. Some experts believe that this tendency is a growing problem within our nation's political system and continues to be an increasing source debate. A president can lose public approval if there is a sense that an external group has more sway over the president and his agenda than the voters do. Like many aspects of the presidency, the relationship with interest groups requires a careful balance. Student body presidents do not want to become puppets of the administration or any other group at their university, and yet those presidents that report very positive working relationships with this group have produced the most tangible results for their respective student bodies. Owen Agho believes that his organization has been very effective this past year due to his good relations with university administration. "I am in very good standing with the top university administration. When I have asked for something, they have yet to turn me down. I was able to use this clout to set in the motion some very exciting things for students this past year." In both the federal level and in a university setting, it is essential that a president utilize the resources that are provided by various interest groups while still maintaining ultimate authority over policy making based upon the interests of the voters. The outside influences of the media and interest groups compose the "extra factors" that can influence a president's term in office. The nature of the interactions with these groups affects the political capital of the president and influence the political atmosphere to which a successor will enter.

V. The Legacy

Every president hopes that their policy changes and initiatives will be carried on long after they leave their office. Especially with the impact of term limits on some presidential offices, a successful transition can ensure a legacy of policy development and programs. Unfortunately, a smooth transition has been proven hard to come by according to the sample of student body presidents used for this study. Owen Agho of University of Michigan Flint says that transitions are almost nonexistent at his University, attributing it to the tendency that “the elections seem to create a lot of bitterness and so outgoing administrations do not usually help incoming administrations.” Both Shahad Atiya of the University of Michigan Dearborn and James Gale of Wayne State University also report difficult transition periods when they came into office. In both cases they believe this was the result of the outgoing administration’s disdain toward the newly elected executives. This scenario mirrors the federal transition between presidents of different parties. Very often the former administrations initiatives are overhauled or scrapped and the new team works to lay the foundation of their own political agenda. Although student governments do not openly adopt parties, the elections invariably create factions that can cause just as much conflict as national opposing parties. If the outgoing and incoming administrations have similar political agendas however there is little time to waste when the new administration comes into office. Since time plays such a critical role in regards to a student government transition, often political coaching begins immediately after the election. The primary concern for the outgoing student body president is to pass on their established relationships and partnerships with other influential groups at the university. When asked about the

potential success of the next administration, Shahad Atiya replied, "If they maintain the relationships that we have worked on this entire year, I don't see why they would have a great year ahead of them. The hurdles that we had to overcome with certain individuals in the beginning of our term was what set us back the most from fulfilling more goals. It is important though, for our successors not to drop those ties with faculty, alumni, the chancellor and vice chancellors, and other administrators because that is the only way they will consider student government concerns." As an outgoing president myself, I share Shahad's concerns about the success of the next administration, but will join the other outgoing student body presidents in diligently passing on our knowledge to our successors.

The numerous duties of the student body president strike comparison with many modern political institutions of the United States. The way that a student president legitimizes their bid for candidacy, partakes in the elections and gains the support of a diverse voters, amasses political influence, and effectively achieves policy changes for the betterment of their constituents all closely mirror the federal presidency. The student body presidents that participated in this project exemplify the continuity of student governments across the state in many ways. Their statements prove that while the institutions of the government may be the same from administration to administration, the abilities of the student body president dictate the overall success of the organization throughout the year. Herein lies the most profound similarity between the two presidential offices, which can also determine successful administrations. A president from either realm that surrounds themselves with the most intelligent and effective executive team and maintains a

focused and representative style of leadership will achieve success in many, if not all of their initiatives while in office. Additionally, they will be able to better “preserve, protect, and defend the rights and interests” of their respective constituencies.

This paper sought to highlight the trends in the student governments of the Michigan public universities. However, the schools that contributed to this paper only represent one third of this group. The low response rate to the distributed questionnaire made generalization difficult throughout the study and it should be noted that the conclusions of this paper might not represent the student government institutions at non-participatory schools. With more time and resources, responses from the remaining schools would have brought new dynamics to the comparison and would greatly enhance the scope and authority of the conclusions within paper.

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Appendix I

The following questionnaire was administered by email to the Student Body Presidents for the 2009 -2010 academic school year of the 15 state supported universities in the state of Michigan. Responding universities include Wayne State University, University of Michigan Dearborn, University of Michigan Flint and Saginaw Valley State University. In some cases email follow-up and personal interviews provided additional quoted material in this paper.

When did you decide that you would run for student body president/ vice president?

What was the single biggest obstacle that you faced while campaigning?

How is voter turnout at your school?

Who is in charge of the election?

How do you select your cabinet / executive board?

Describe the separation of powers (judicial / legislative/ executive).

How does having such a short term affect your productivity?

How is the relationship between your organization and the school newspaper (or other media outlets)?

Describe the faculty / staff relations at your school. Do they argue about everything? Do you feel your concerns are taken as seriously as a faculty or staff member?

Describe your capacity to influence university decision-making.

What has your experience been working with other student leadership throughout the state?

What is the transition process like in between administrations?

Do your governing documents change much from year to year?

Do your successors have the capability to be successful in the projects that you have started?