Diversifying Our Assets? The Impact of Institutional Funding to Student Organizations on Student Perceptions at Kennesaw State University

Kennesaw State University
School of Conflict Management, Peacebuilding and Development

Taylor Downs

School of Conflict Management, Peacebuilding and Development

INTRODUCTION

Universities are one of the key institutions for the free exchange of thoughts and ideas in American society. Given this fact, many different opinions, identity groups, and ideologies interact with one another on a daily basis on university campuses. While these groups typically identify as one unit (such as Owls, Eagles, Yellow Jackets, or Bulldogs), colleges are structured into different segments, each with their own interests, identities, and desires. This occurs at every level of these institutions, separating faculty, administration, and students, and then further subdividing each specific group. These different groups each have varying levels of power and different (sometimes competing) interpretations of what college should be in classrooms and in the community. Kennesaw State University exemplifies this phenomenon in the situation surrounding its distribution of funding to student organizations, and the resulting opinions, essentialisms, and narratives that result from these divisions and perceived inequalities. Students bring their own identities and conceptions of the college experience to the campus community, and with those come varying expectations. These students become involved with registered student organizations (RSOs), interacting with like-minded peers and forming different identity groups. These organizations are regulated and defined by Kennesaw State as an institution, and they receive funding based on criteria set by KSU. The institutional valuation of an organization's contribution to the university community, and the competition over the limited funds available to RSOs, creates the potential for conflict and negative perceptions of other student groups among students involved with RSOs at KSU. Therefore, using insights from theories on identity, representations, and in-group/out-group dynamics (Ashforth Mael, 1989; Golden-Biddle and Rao, 1997), this poster asks if many of the accepted factors that lead to intergroup bias exist at Kennesaw State University, and if they result from the distribution and competition over funding by student organizations from the university's administration.

METHODOLOGY

Primary data was collected from five semi-structured interviews of participants in student organizations and two direct observation sessions of an inter-group student funding organization.

I used quota sampling to select students from faith-based, sports, academic, hobby, and Greek life student organizations. This was done by going through the student organization directory at https://owllife.kennesaw.edu/Organizations and dividing the university's student organizations into five categories (faith, sports, academic, hobby, Greek life).

Two field observations were conducted to triangulate the interview data. Given that the phenomena my study wishes to examine is the effect of funding on student perceptions of one another, observing meetings between members of different student organizations who were making funding decisions (for other student organizations) provided clear examples of this phenomena playing out at Kennesaw State. An inter-group funding committee at KSU provided these observation opportunities.

Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1: Student organizations function as in-groups at Kennesaw State University.

Hypothesis 2: Institutional funding hardens perceptions of in-groups and out-groups at KSU, while creating conflict and exacerbating essentialisms and stereotypes about out-groups.

Hypothesis 3: Inter-group contact between members of different student organizations mitigates conflict, essentialisms, and stereotypes on KSU's campus.

Codes

In-group: Any mention of the participant's student organization when they express strong levels of their identity, or instances where they view their organization positively, seeing their own attributes and methods as superior to those of various out-groups.
Out-group: Any mention of other organizations in a negative context reflecting comparison, competition, or hostility (positive comments about the out-group were also recorded for comparison).
Conflict: Any mention of disagreement or competition over institutional (or other) sources of funding/organizational operation.
Contact: Any mention of instances when groups from different student organization categories (academic, religious, sports, hobbies, Greek life) interact on campus.

Figure 2: Word Cloud of Most Frequent Words Used During Semi-Structured Interviews.

Breakdown of Categories

Faith – Faith-Based and Spiritual

Sports – Special Interest (sports related)

Academic – Academic or Professional, Applied Academic Competition Teams, Graduate, Honors Societies

Hobby – Cultural and Global, Political, Social Action, Community Service, Performance and Fine Arts, Special Interest (non-sports related), Publications and Media

Greek Life – Fraternities and Sororities

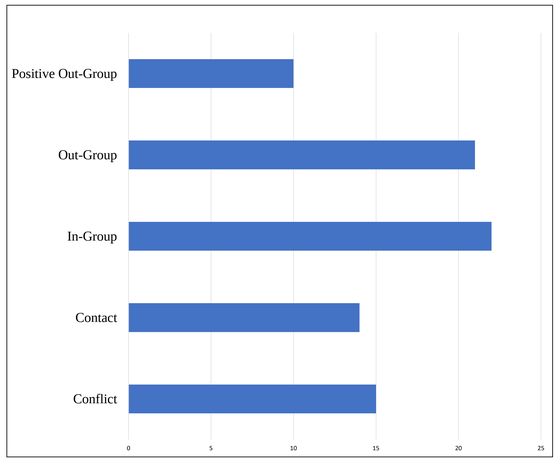

Figure 1: Occurrences of Codes in Interviews

1. *Yes, these are my beliefs. Um… some other ones… I suppose I would equate academic honors societies with people who are more intelligent, people who are slightly above the mold.*

2. *"Okay, I need to go home now." I was crying. I thought they were so nice and accepting, but then I realized they just wanted me to join their cult.*

3. *Greek life actually [does] benefit KSU and the community, actually Greek life does do a good job with the Children's Miracle. They help with some 24-hour dance marathon in the convocation center.*

4. *And then you have the religious organizations reaching Greek life, and so they're like three of them [working with] Greek life too.*

5. *There's a lot of restrictions that kind of just intimidate me, like you can't be here, you have to get this permission, you have to- Like everything seems to be too structured.*

Figure 3: Exemplary Quotes from Interviews

RESULTS

Analysis of the semi-structured interviews indicates that registered student organizations function as in-groups at KSU. Throughout the course of the five interviews, references to in-groups occurred on 22 occasions (Figure 1; #1, Figure 3)

Out-groups received a similar amount of mentions during my conversations with the participants, coming up on 21 occasions. Every group had at least one mention from the total pool of interviews, but several groups received more attention than others (Figure 1; #2, Figure 3)

In contrast to these negative perceptions of out-groups, 10 mentions of positive perceptions were made of outgroups. These were generally made in reference to networking opportunities for others, fundraising for charitable organizations, and groups acting as points of shared interest for students (Figure 1; #3, Figure 3).

Contact (Pettigrew, 1998) was mentioned 14 times throughout the interviewing process by all participants (Figure 1; #4, Figure 3).

The conflict category was mentioned 15 times in the interviews, but only occurred in two of the interviews with participants (Figure 1; #5, Figure 3).

Figure 2 provides an overview of the words most mentioned during the interviews.

CONCLUSION

Enough support exists in this plausibility probe for each of the hypotheses tested in this study to warrant further examination. Social identity theory and conflict theory are prevalent theories in the field of conflict resolution, and aspects of each exist in the interactions and perceptions of students in student organizations here at Kennesaw State. Research over "greed" and/or economic concerns within organizations also received support from the data analyzed within this study. While the small number of participants and observations limits the generalizability of these findings, the presence of each of these factors amongst those who highly identify with their student organizations warrants the further study of student organizations' impact on identity, as well as the potential conflicts that can result over students' perceptions of one another, especially over the issue of funding.

References

Ashforth, Blake and Fred Mael. 1989. "Social Identity Theory and the Organization." *The Academy of Management Review* Vol. 14, No. 1, pp. 20-39.

Golden-Biddle, Karen, and Hayagreeva Rao. 1997. "Breaches in the Boardroom: Organizational Identity and Conflicts of Commitment in a Nonprofit Organization." *Organization Science* 593-611.

Pettigrew, Thomas. 1998. "Inter-group Contact Theory." *Annual Review of Psychology* 49: 65–85.

Faculty Sponsor: Dr. Brandon D. Lundy