RESEARCH

The Role and Responsibilities of Pharmacy Student Government Associations in Pharmacy Programs

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Objective. To identify student government designs used by pharmacy programs and to examine their functions, duties, and relationships with other student organizations.

Methods. A 21-question survey was developed and distributed to pharmacy deans, who were asked to forward the survey to the leader of their student government organization. Results were analyzed in aggregate.

Results. Seventy-one programs responded (56%). Of respondents, 96% had a pharmacy student government association (PSGA). Programs officers generally consisted of a president (87%), secretary (81%), vice-president (79%), and treasurer (70%). Functions of the PSGAs included oversight of fundraisers (76%), on-campus events (69%), social events (61%), organizational meetings (59%), and off-campus events (57%). Approximately half (45%) of PSGAs were part of a larger, university-wide student government.

Conclusion. While student government organizations are nearly universal in pharmacy programs, their oversight of other student organizations, as well as their involvement within a larger university-wide student government, varies greatly.

Keywords: student governance, leadership, governance associations

INTRODUCTION

Governance in most academic institutions is achieved through the involvement of constituents such as students, faculty members, administration, and staff. Students who engage in governance activities enhance their knowledge regarding university workings while experiencing personal growth and development. For example, students involved in student government gain effective communication and active listening skills, as well as leadership skills such as effectively running meetings and adequately weighing others' demands.[1]

Participation in pharmacy student governance associations (PSGA) allows students to play a part in the decision-making process of the institution. The 2016 Accreditation Council for Pharmacy Education (ACPE) Standards place an increased emphasis on fostering leadership in students with Standard 9.1.[2] Furthermore, Standard 15.4 addresses the need to consider student perspectives and include student representation on committees and policy development bodies where appropriate[2]. Additionally, the 2013 CAPE Outcomes as well as the 2016 ACPE Standards have also placed an increased emphasis on developing pharmacy learners as leaders in Standard 4.2,[2,3] demonstrating an increasing commitment to pharmacy programs that provide mechanisms to develop student leaders.

Limited information exists in the literature regarding student governance in colleges and schools of pharmacy. Furthermore, additional literature searches of student governance in other settings of higher learning yielded no studies. The number of pharmacy graduates in the United States has grown significantly during the past decade[4], so comparative information regarding student governance, including types of student governance organizations and their involvement with the university community, may be beneficial for individual programs. The objectives of this study were to determine the composition and officers in pharmacy student governance programs, to examine the functions and duties of student governance, and to explore the relationships between the PSGA and other student organizations and the university student governance association.

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Table 1. Demographics of Survey Respondents

	Type of School				Class Size		
	4-year Private	**4-year Public**	**3-year Private**	**3-year Public**	**<100**	**101-150**	**151+**
No. Respondents	36	28	6	1	35	20	16
Total Programs in Category	62	54	12	1	62	37	30
% Responded	58	52	50	100	56	54	53

METHODS

To collect data, a 21-question survey was designed and developed based upon the experiences of the authors as a student government president, student government advisor, and as deans of student affairs. The survey addressed the composition and officers of PSGAs, functions and duties, and relationship between PSGAs and university-wide student government associations. Questions were reviewed by multiple faculty members and student leaders prior to its release. The authors acquired e-mail addresses of each pharmacy dean from 129 pharmacy programs with ACPE accreditation status (precandidate, candidate, or full accreditation) as of January 2013. The survey invitation was distributed via e-mail the same month. Deans were asked to forward the survey to a student government representative within their program. If no response was received after 2 weeks, a second request was sent. No individual responses were assessed; results were made anonymous and analyzed in aggregate. Statistical analyses were performed utilizing t tests for continuous data and chi-square or Fisher exact tests for categorical data (GraphPad Software Inc., La Jolla, CA). The study was deemed exempt by the Institutional Review Board at Western New England University.

RESULTS

The survey had a 56% (71/129) response rate. Respondent demographics are displayed in Table 1. Respondents were representative of the diversity of pharmacy programs found in the United States, as no one type or size of program was particularly over or under-represented. Of the 71 respondents, almost all (96%, 68/71) indicated their pharmacy program had a student government. Common names of the governance organizations included Pharmacy Student Council, Pharmacy Governing Council, Student Government Association, Student Governance Association and Student Leadership Council. The majority of PSGAs (75%) held a general meeting once a month. All of the responding organizations reported that students were responsible for choosing their officers (100%). Most PSGAs consisted of an executive board comprised of a president (87%), secretary (81%), vice-president (79%), and treasurer (70%), with historian (12%), president-elect (7%), webmaster (4%), and parliamentarian

(4%) less common offices. In general, PSGAs and pharmacy programs did not impose term limits on officers (77%), and most (82%) did not prohibit officers from concurrently serving as officers in other student organizations. Voting members of the PSGAs included class officers (72%), executive board members (60%), representatives from PSGA recognized organizations (57%), and the pharmacy student body (30%).

The majority (75%) of PSGAs served to oversee pharmacy students and pharmacy student organizational activities. Specific functions of the PSGAs included oversight of fundraisers (76%), on-campus events (69%), social events (61%), organizational meetings (59%), and off-campus events (57%) (Figure 1). Other less common responses were dispersal of funds to requesting organizations (8%) and approval of new organizations (4%). In order to accomplish these tasks, 46% of the PSGAs' executive members had weekly or biweekly meetings in addition to their general meetings.

Ninety-four percent of the respondents indicated their pharmacy program was part of a larger school or university, yet there was almost an even split regarding PSGAs being involved with the larger student government, as 45% (28/62) indicated that they were part of the university-wide government, where 55% (34/62) indicated that they were not. Pharmacy programs with 150 or fewer students per class were less likely than those with 151 or more students to have a PSGA involved in university-wide student governance (18/48, 37.5% and 10/14,
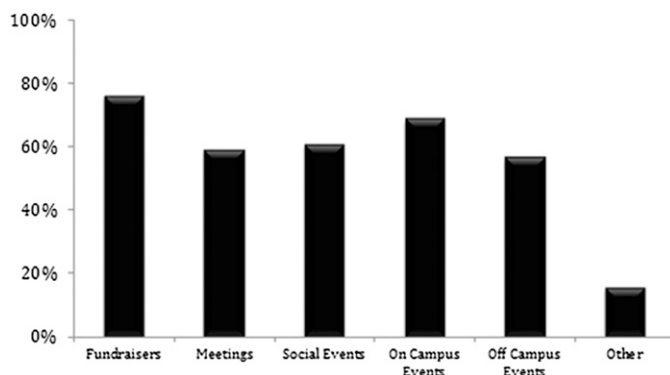

Figure 1. The Student Organization Activities Overseen by Pharmacy Student Government Associations (PSGAs).

71.4%; $p=0.0340$, respectively). Among those who indicated they were part of a university-wide student government, 89% (25/28) indicated that they were satisfied with that arrangement, as it benefited their organization and pharmacy students. Noted benefits included connection with the university, ease of sharing information with the university, and additional available resources.

Among those who indicated they were not part of the university-wide student government, 80% (28/35) answered that they were satisfied functioning independently from the larger organization and did not feel this absence hindered their program's representation within the university. Reasons for this position included having different funding and needs from the larger university, receiving their own funding, having their own budget to distribute funds to pharmacy organizations (instead of having to go through the university student government), and having less conflict as a result of not dealing with policies and bureaucracies of university student government. Fifty-five percent of the respondents stated that although their government organization was independent, they had a liaison to the university-wide organization or connected with them in other more informal ways (through prepharmacy or other social organizations).

DISCUSSION

Student participation in governance at an academic institution serves several purposes and is a major component of the co-curricular aspects of the pharmacy degree program.[5,6] Formal PSGAs provide a forum for students to provide input on issues that affect the academic institution and student life, and at some institutions, allows students an opportunity to participate in the decision-making process. Student voice through involvement in governance organizations also creates a venue for discussion with the administration and faculty members on issues that impact the institution. Additionally, participation in such organizations and other student organizations creates an opportunity for professional development.[7]

Formal student government organizations were present in almost all schools included in this study. Commonly, there was an executive system of governance, with 4 major officers composing an executive board, with other organizations supplying a representative to vote in a larger legislative group. However, a small minority of organizations did lack a centralized PSGA and instead had a delegates-style of governance (where each recognized student organization is represented by a single voting member). The leaders of every responding PSGA were chosen by students, either directly by election or indirectly by election to another position that served on the executive team. This signified that student leaders

were dependent upon the trust of their peers, and those perceived as not sufficiently representing the students could be held accountable at a future election, or even be recalled from office.

Roles and responsibilities of the PSGAs were diverse. Although PSGAs were often in charge of overseeing fundraisers and campus events, the majority of schools (82%) did not prohibit PSGA officers from serving as officers in other organizations. This practice could lead to perceptions of conflicts of interest; for example, if the PSGA president was also an officer of a college-wide organization (such as a fraternity), another fraternity may perceive bias in PSGA decisions if the non-represented fraternity were denied funds that instead went to represented fraternity. The house-of-delegates model could mitigate perceptions of bias, as all college-wide organizations would have an equal seat at the table. Depending on the roles and functions of a PSGA, programs should be aware of potential conflicts of interest that may exist if the PSGA officers serve on other groups that report to the PSGA.

Most response divergence occurred regarding PSGA involvement with the larger university student governance. Our results found that 45% of respondents were involved with their university-wide governance organization, while 55% were not. While respondents gave no clear reason why some PSGAs were part of the larger organization and others were not, pharmacy programs with class sizes of 151 or more were more likely than smaller programs to be a part of a university-wide student governance. It is possible that these programs are more likely to exist within a large graduate/professional school at a university and may find more benefits of being part of institution-wide organization. Further, these programs may simply be too large for a university-wide governance system to ignore. In contrast, PSGAs who may be the only professional/graduate program on their campus may thrive in a more autonomous setting. A number of pharmacy programs are housed in a separate location than the main university (undergraduate) campus,[8] which may also make interaction with a larger student government more challenging. Additionally, a few freestanding schools of pharmacy would not have a university-wide group to interact with. Interestingly, most organizations (90%) were satisfied with being a part of the larger group if they were part of the larger group, while those who were not part of a larger group were satisfied with their nonparticipation (80%).

Several potential study limitations exist that merit mentioning. The first is that the study did not directly identify participants; rather it contacted the dean and asked them to forward the survey to the most appropriate student leader. This indirect contact may have hindered

the response rate compared to what we previously received when directly contacting study participants[9] and could potentially have created nonresponder bias. However, the response rate and demographics were representative of the academy as a whole (in terms of class size and type of school), above 50% in every category (Table 1). A second limitation was the potential for responders to misinterpret the intent of survey questions. To minimize this limitation, questions were reviewed by faculty members and student leaders prior to the survey release to determine interpretations of survey questions. Additionally, a comment section was added to questions and to the end of the survey that could have varied interpretation. All comments were reviewed, and no patterns of question misinterpretation were detected.

CONCLUSION

Student government organizations serve an important role in college-wide governance. Although the purpose and focus differs depending on the organization's situation within the institution, most organizations provided a mechanism for students to be represented and give meaningful input to the administration. They also played significant roles in the oversight of other pharmacy student organizations and had diverse activities including fund raisers, meetings, social events, and campus-based and remote events. Future research should examine the effectiveness of these organizations within the school and student perception of the impact of such organizations in the governance functions of the school and in decision-making processes.

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