Executive Summary
College Student Government Leaders' Experiences with Campus Crises and Emergencies

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Introduction

The study of college student government leaders is a worthy exploration. College student government leaders play a role in institutional decision-making (Alexander, 1969; Goodman, 2021a, 2021b; Goodman et al., 2021; Kuh & Lund, 1994; Laosebikan-Buggs, 2006; Sartorius, 2018; Templeton et al., 2018), and are often considered the 'voice' of a student body through representative leadership (Broadhurst, 2019; Goodman, 2024; Patrick, 2023; Templeton et al., 2018). College student governments have expanded the types of issues they take up on campus, and debate and legislate major issues associated with social justice, diversity, inclusion, and access, as well as major local, national, and global crises and emergencies (e.g., resolutions about climate change, campus policing, budgetary decisions; Goodman et al., 2021). As part of their role, student government leaders are called to respond to educational crises and emergencies, including environment and facility disasters and incidents that impact humans on campus.

Statement of the Problem

Elected student government leaders are positioned and primed to tackle major crises and emergencies on their college campuses. Yet, there is insufficient literature about students' involvement in crisis and emergency response and, in particular, those efforts that involve student government leaders. As a result, it is especially important to explore crises and emergencies at the intersection of college student government. Given that student government leaders are meeting frequently with administrators (Goodman, 2021a; Templeton et al., 2018) and even state and city leaders (Goodman, 2024), a question related to their ability to influence or engage with varying incidents on campus emerges. Furthermore, student government leaders' access to decision-making also positions them to be a key stakeholder as campuses face challenges and are called to respond in timely and impactful ways.

Purpose and Research Study

A precise global definition of crisis does not exist. For the purposes of the research, we define educational crisis as being comprised of the following components: "a negative event or outcome, the element of surprise, limited response time, disruption of operations, and a threat to the safety and well-being of people" (Rollo & Zdziarski, 2020, p. 24) and occurring at a school or educational facility, or affecting a school or community. With this definition in mind, our research is guided by the following, open-ended question: *What are the lived experiences of*

student government leaders who have faced educational crises and emergencies on campus? The purpose of this research study is to better understand students' experiences in these elected roles, including the very crises and emergencies they face(d) at different U.S. institutions.

Methods

In this qualitative study, we interviewed 25 undergraduate student government presidents and vice presidents about their experiences with campus crises and emergencies. Participating students must have served in their elected role between 2021-2024 academic years, and all confirmed that they experienced, according to their own definition, some type of crisis while in office. Interviews took place during Spring 2024, were conducted via Zoom, and ranged from 45-80 minutes in length. Participants were provided a $20 gift card for their time, courtesy of the National Association for Campus Activities. All three researchers participated in the interviews, and two researchers cleaned transcripts after all interviews had completed. The lead researcher led the analysis process, which included both inductive and deductive coding, as well as establishing themes around and related to Zdziarski et al.'s (2020) crisis matrix.

Participants: Of the 25 participants, two served as vice president and 23 served as student government president (seven of whom previously served as vice president). Participants were found in all regions of the United States (Midwest, Northeast, Northwest, Southeast, Southwest, and West), and came from varying institution types (e.g., Hispanic-Serving Institutions, large urban, private, public, religious-affiliated, varying athletic conferences, and more). Students were mostly juniors and seniors at the time of their crisis experience, and most had been involved in student government for several years prior to that, including during middle and high school.

Key Findings

Three major themes emerged in the findings of this study. First, we saw all three crisis types represented from Zdziarski et al.'s (2020) crisis matrix. Next, we saw that students' encounters with and perceptions of campus administrators were salient to their experience, although levels of engagement with campus administrators varied widely. Finally, student leaders' emotional, mental, and physical health emerged as a point of concern, as students dealt with both the role and various crises. We feature a few brief examples to illuminate each thematic element/finding.

Crisis Types

First, we found all type dimensions (environment crises, facilities crises, and human crises) of Zdziarski et al.'s (2020) crisis matrix across the sample of 25 participants.

Environment Crises: Participants discussed extreme weather multiple times. Victor, a former student body president, shared that a major building on campus was impacted by weather causing pipes to burst, leaving the building unusable. Students and staff were displaced to other parts of campus, and student government leaders were called on by students and staff to respond

and mitigate the situation. In another example shared by participant Jack, a natural disaster impacted a particular area of his institution's city. In this instance, there were several students who were unable to come to campus, and thus, the institution moved classes to Zoom. Similar to Victor, Jack was left with the expectation that crisis response was a part of his role as president, even though he felt the circumstances were far out of his control.

Facility Crises: Facility crises were wide-reaching, and many were deeply intertwined with environment crises (e.g., see Victor's example above) and human crises. For example, Alex talked about a bomb threat placed on the institution, as well as a student apartment complex that caught fire and displaced dozens of students. Robin Connell also talked about issues involving residential life, including enrollment concerns that led to major complications in the residence halls. These examples of facility crises were typically not immediately connected to student government, yet, student government leaders were asked or expected to be part of the response – either from the students themselves or administrators and community members.

Human Crises: Human crises were plenty in this study, and included (among others) student death and injury, campus racial and diversity/inclusion crises, student government organizational and personnel crises, legal issues, mental health concerns, and more. During Henry's time as student government president, two students passed away on campus, including one person who he was close to. He shared, "It's like…that was certainly a huge thing for our campus. When [the first student] specifically passed away it was really bad." Given Henry attended a small college, "everyone knew what was going on," which increased the expectations of his presence in response. During part of Hannah's tenure, she dealt with several racial justice issues, including protests involving Black Lives Matter and the murders of Black individuals by police violence. Hannah found herself working on policy and "pushing the university for hate bias policy" as part of her role as president, even though that was not part of her initial campaign platform or original political agenda as a campus leader.

Israel and Palestine Conflict(s): While we saw these three crisis types reflected in the conversations with participants, the Israel and Palestine conflict came to the fore as a distinct and acute crisis for participants. Several students had calls from their student body to make a statement, in support of one community or another. Rose captured this best when she said, "I'm literally 20 years old and I'm dealing with, like, a global crisis, like what in the world? And I think my biggest thing was that I just wasn't receiving a lot of support." Similar to Rose, several participants talked at length about the various ways the conflict between Israel and Palestine punctuated their time as college student government leaders. Many received pushback regarding resolutions and statements, campus protest concerns, and free speech questions. Some students also grappled with divestment calls and student organization recognition on their campus.

Administrators Engagement

Across the board, participants noted that administrators played a huge role in their experiences. For some, this relationship was "really confrontational;" for example, Astor shared about an experience where an administrator threatened him, and noted, "I ran into [the senior student affairs administrator] in the hallway. She was like, "[Astor] I saw the statement you all released like a few days ago…you have to like, tell me about these things…what are you doing?" For others, administrators and advisors served as mentors and maintained strong relationships to students – in some cases, there was trust and collaboration, as well as synergy and thoughtful advising. Notably, some students mentioned having half-hearted or weak relationships with campus administrators, the absence of which also enormously played into their experience as student government leaders. Outside of the campus administrators, in some instances, there was involvement from city and state leaders (e.g., several talked about an Attorney General of their state getting involved in their decision-making or response to student issues). In one instance, James was actually named in a lawsuit; through the legal process, he was cared for and protected by his administrators, and especially the president of his institution who he considered a close mentor and friend. Through all of this, many participants talked about a tension between their representation of students being at odds with perspectives and relationships with administrators. Cameron captured this by sharing, "I feel like I've moved a lot from sympathizing with students to sympathizing with administration, and that feels kind of scabby to me a little bit." This "scabby" the Cameron names places students in the crosshairs of service and leadership.

Student Leader Health and Wellness

Finally, and perhaps among the most concerning, we found participants were grappling with varying mental and emotional wellness concerns as a result of the role and/or crises faced. Some leaders were exhausted, maintaining availability at all hours and in multiple capacities – to fellow students, as well as administrators and community members. Rose recalled peers feeling the student government crisis they were facing was "creating health concerns," and Martha ended up not seeking election for president after dealing with several personal attacks as a student government vice president. Similarly, leaders in our study faced direct harassment, bullying, and threats because of their role and/or involvement in the student government response to campus crises. One leader, Hannah, shared that she was "cancelled" because of a decision made regarding Israel and Palestine conflicts. Additionally, several leaders talked about the heaviness of responding to student death. For example, many leaders in this study shared that they were called by the university president or chancellor each time a student passed away, and some were asked or expected to speak at campus-wide memorials because of their role. Being the face of the student body in front of grieving students, families, and friends was a heavy burden to bear, while also managing their own grief, work, and academic responsibilities.

Insights and Implications

There is much to be gleaned from this study, including the diverse ways that institutions manage crises and emergencies, and the institutional expectation of students in student government during crises and emergencies. It is clear that institutions are dealing with educational crises and emergencies across all types at a rapid pace, and that response from many stakeholders, including students, staff, and administrators, is a necessity. Student government leaders are often at the center of this response, acting as front-line advocates and representatives to/for students and administrators. Given that crises are often unpredictable and span a wide range of issues, with response varying accordingly, student leaders are often adjusting in their role along with managing multiple moving parts. With this in mind, there are several implications for practice that are relevant to administrators, advisors, and the students themselves.

First, campus administrators and student government advisors should consider themselves as allies and supports to students, and especially student government leaders who are receiving feedback and inquiry at a rapid pace during crises. Majority of the leaders in this study were 18-22 years of age while serving, and that support would have a great impact. Communication is also a key component during crisis and emergency response, and these individuals should consider not only who sends campus-wide messages, but what the messages say about crises, and under what type of time frame they are communicated. Administrators/advisors and students should work through crisis response together, which ensures that all leaders (administrators and students, alike) have the same relevant information and understanding of the issue at hand. Next, administrators/advisors have an opportunity to see and support student leaders beyond their roles. This may include mentoring students, caring for them, and helping manage what is expected of them in this role. Given that many administrators/advisors have standing meetings with students, this might mean a re-design of the already-existing meeting, where each party moves beyond check-box check-ins, and instead explores using meeting time to connect purposefully. Furthermore, administrators/advisors can build up the support for students as they approach crises that, in particular, deal with death and loss. This includes using trauma-informed strategies like offering pathways for mental health resources, time for emotional processing after memorials, and offering flexibility to student leader involvement in campus response to student death depending on their proximity and relationship to the deceased.

Finally, and simply put, student government presidents and vice presidents need support across the board. There should be training prior to taking leadership positions, including human resources training around sensitive topics like conflict management, Title IX guidelines, and managing often large institutional budgets. Many students described taking their leadership positions with little to no guidance from the previous student government administration or campus advisors (e.g., no transition meeting), while almost immediately being faced with managing a crisis or emergency. Others described being asked to speak with news outlets, or being advised against it, and one student leader mentioned explicit media training prior to an

on-air interview with a major cable television news outlet. Some students underscored that clips of their interviews are now online, memorializing a snapshot of their time in office for anyone to see with a quick Google search of their name. All of these insights necessitate the recommendation of media training for college student government leaders prior to taking office.

Limitations and Future Research

There were a few limitations in this work, which can be addressed and explored in future research. First, many participants experienced crises and emergencies related to COVID-19, which across the board was an unpredictable experience in higher education that caused many challenges. Given the serving range in our sample, many students experienced an early college or leadership tenure that included COVID-19 concerns and attention. Additionally,, we did not have participants who attended Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Tribal Colleges, or single-gender institutions. Future research can look specifically at crises faced by students in these distinct institutional environments, and the decidedly unique circumstances of prolonged COVID-19 crisis and how that impacted student government leaders' experiences.

Future research on this topic can also consider the nuances of "student government work," and the dual expectations of being a student and also acting as a kind of administrator. What does this mean in times of crisis and emergency when institutional response is not only important, but entrenched in complex bureaucracy and organizational structures? Further, what do students gain from their "work" in student government and these dual roles? While previous research has looked at student government preparation for careers in higher education and post-college public office, future research can examine how these roles might be preparatory for managing highly public and scrutinized events. The role of student government leader is complex; the expectations are high, the qualifications vary widely, and the responsibilities greatly depend on environmental factors of the institution. Additional research could explore the relationships between campus administrators and student government leadership and the nuances of administrative management while mentoring, student leaders "managing up," and how administor-student relationships can impact students' leadership tenure. Finally, preliminary findings from this study demonstrate that the mental health of student government leaders is often overlooked during crises and emergencies in service of 'smoothing' out a larger issue. There is an urgent need for more research on how the mental health of student government leaders is being considered in higher education, and particularly in their leadership roles. We use our research around crises and emergencies to elevate questions around how student mental health can be protected in higher education. Research may examine the impact of online bullying and harassment of student leaders, the role that counseling can play in the student government leader role, and how serving in a public role at a young age can impact mental health.

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