

Student Voices as Nouveau Committee Work: Providing a Platform and Safe Community for the Realization of Inspired Student-led Projects

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Abstract

Department committee work is a necessary yet vital component of higher education institutions. Untapped potential exists within students, and committees can be established or adapted to support the passionate interests of innovative students. When students receive trust, respect, and freedom to author ideas of personal importance into manifestation, they are enriched at a comprehensive level. This paper shares the origins and initial successes and challenges of a committee that provides a safe and encouraging platform for diverse and talented students to critically produce meaningful content at an international university in Japan. Beginning with the establishment of a respectful and inclusive environment, the main roles of the committee members are to facilitate student-led projects, hold regular meetings, advise, and provide accountability for students to be empowered achievers beyond the classroom. In addition to the students' sincere commitment, mandatory criteria for the student-led projects include being: inclusive, ongoing, realistic, educational, and featured as part of the Student Voices committee community. This paper describes examples of current student-led projects based on topics such as: social justice, environmental education, university clubs, and intercultural exchange. There is a need for a new style of committee that is focused on the development of skills of intercultural communication, Social Networking Service (SNS) content production, and leadership action by students. Further strategies for how to frame the benefits of a niche committee service to department directors are suggested.

Keywords: Student Voices, Student-Led, Student Empowerment, Committee Work, Committee Service, Faculty Work

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Introduction

More than merely teachers or researchers, educators should be advocates for student voices. Furthermore, student voices, ideas and projects should be supported and nurtured by faculty instructors at the university level, as this will foster the growth of student empowerment, leadership development, and university community. Assor et. all (2002) state that the essential role of an instructor is to attempt to comprehend students' passions and goals.... teachers may help them in establishing such passions and goals. Students who seek to enhance their leadership skills require assistance in understanding how their desire toward development may prosper or be stunted by self-development activities (Allen & Hartmen, 2009). Therefore, university instructors can play a vital role in assisting students to pursue their passion. Instructors have the opportunity to enable student leadership development while encouraging student-led projects outside of the classroom. Understanding that university instructors have a responsibility to take on committee work, the authors of this paper were able to turn this responsibility into an opportunity to create "Student Voices." The formation of this nouveau committee supports student-led projects that express students' ideas, goals, and passions.

Levin et al. (2006) suggest that as teaching and student advising roles and their accompanying responsibilities grow, committee work, particularly for full-time staff, becomes more institutional, and increasingly aligned with the interests and goals of the management staff of the university. However, why must this institutionalized, austere nature of committee work continue to be inflexible in its approach and departmental implementation? Instead of committee work feeling like a burden for many university instructors, this mandatory responsibility should be seen as departmental programming that is engaging for both students and staff. Euster and Weinbach (1998) offer the query "Is membership in some committees more sought after than in others, or are all committee services viewed as a necessary evil?" The authors were able to create a new committee that fit their passions and skill sets, while supporting the passions and developing valuable skill sets of the students in the production of their projects. The creation of this new committee was made possible by the commitment of the authors, effective planning, framing the benefits of the nouveau committee to colleagues and superiors, and necessary support from department directors.

This nouveau committee work, and specifically the student-led projects, began to grow organically and take on a didactic nature; various projects - wholly student conceived and nurtured - leaned toward relevant social problems, cultural relativity, and developing social media and networking skills. While this was not a goal of the new committee work, this homegrown focus, and the eventual production of student-led project content was at times challenging; however, it was an overall rewarding experience for everyone involved. While planning and preparing for this new committee, the authors had a vague idea of how it might take shape in regards to student involvement, social focus of the student-led projects, navigating inter-departmental communication in the creation of a new committee, and what the overall impact of this new committee would be. Defining clear principles and allowing related precepts to guide the formation and ongoing work of this nouveau committee has given the authors the opportunity to thrive.

Motivation

Several motivating factors for the formation of the Student Voices committee were foundational elements and require a more thorough explanation in order to understand the essence of the committee. The initial motive of the authors was to support the development of students' identities and passions. Students should have a safe platform from which to express their authentic selves and genuine interests. Further, the diverse student body with meaningful backgrounds and unique life experiences should have an outlet for sharing their creations and to be validated. In addition, since TIU comprises students from over 60 countries, there is abundant opportunity to build intercultural understanding and awareness. These were the key motivational factors for the new committee.

Proposal for Nouveau Committee

Exciting ideas and the conception of a possible platform are fine in theory, but there is a process to turn abstract ideas and concepts into practical reality. Fortunately, the authors' department directors at TIU are typically open to new ideas if needs and benefits are clearly communicated. Porter (2007) states that faculty attitudes regarding how committees are assigned and how faculty perceive this committee experience remain meaningful topics for future studies and discussion. Further, Euster and Weinbach (1998) note that where university administrators regularly acknowledge the need for crucial responsibilities such as curriculum planning and design, student enrollment, and professional development, often there is scant personal benefit for undertaking this compulsory and expected committee work. Understanding this common, unrewarding atmosphere for mandatory university committee work, the authors decided to carefully strategize in planning a new committee. Before a formal request was made to begin a new committee, multiple meetings were held among the authors with the intention of thoroughly discussing practical logistics of creating the new committee and how to effectively articulate the motivation, goals, and benefits of that potential committee. The authors articulately proposed the new committee to the department directors, focusing on the benefits for the students, the department, and the university. Additionally, the proposal was expressed with both sincerity and passion to underscore the importance of the committee's values and the committee members' willingness to follow through with their proposed action plan to start a new and dynamic committee. The Student Voices committee proposal was accepted in December 2019, and the initial vision of this committee has since come to fruition. Student Voices maintains open and honest communication with the department directors and continues to develop based on its foundational motivating factors that have been consolidated into clearer principles.

Principles

The driving principle of the new committee is to promote student voices through student-led projects as honestly and effectively as possible. By empowering students to develop projects based on their own motivations and passions, increased intrinsic motivation, personal fulfillment, and unique expressions of innovation are produced. Further effects of empowerment include expanded levels of self-direction, authorship, and accountability (Herzberg, 1968). Coinciding with providing the platform for students to share their thoughts, ideas, and projects, the second principle is to create a

safe space for students to thrive. In order for students to flourish and approach their creative potential with an authentic voice, they need to feel safe, secure, and confident with sharing meaningful and vulnerable pieces of themselves and their authored works. Seifert (2004) supports the point of view that students often become more intrinsically motivated and develop a sense of confidence and autonomy when they have mentors who are accessible, supportive and sympathetic. The realization of this safe space is made all the more effective with the next principle of fostering an environment of respect and inclusivity. Members of Student Voices are often asked to be open-minded toward others, and allow any willing member of the university to contribute to their project. The final principle is to develop student-led projects that educate and make a positive impact. Although a primary aim of the Student Voices committee is for students to confidently express themselves, a more meaningful objective is to transcend self-fulfillment by benefiting others. The ability to be actively aware of what is outside oneself, or be selfless, is a crucial characteristic of the peak level of human development (Erikson, 1987; Maslow, 1971; Rogers, 1961). These core principles helped lay the foundation for this new kind of committee.

Nouveau Committee

The authors' new committee, Student Voices, is contained within a department that houses approximately 50 staff-member instructors. Those 50 instructors compose roughly a dozen different "coordinator groups" ranging from Curriculum Development, Technology Support, and Testing and Placement; these "traditional" committees include roughly three to six members per group. There is no clear and stated policy for how committee work is requested or allotted, or how long an instructor must work on a committee. Generally, new employees are offered the chance to rank their committee preferences; often, the first preference is not granted. However, an instructor may subsequently request to change committees or propose the formation of a new committee. Department directors have the power to grant or deny such requests or proposals to establish a new committee. Directors have informally stated that any proposal for a new committee must be focused on benefiting students by in some way enhancing their needs and academic skills. Therefore, in order to propose a new committee and have a proposal successfully granted, instructors must plan carefully, clearly articulate the goals, and most important, describe how the new committee will benefit students and assist in their skill development. Moreover, it is crucial to state how and why the new committee will increase student engagement, and to describe the realistic possibility of increasing students' academic skills in relation to raised test scores and graduation rates. Essentially, any new committee must fit a real need and overall goal of the department and university. Any new committee proposal that is not articulated effectively in how it will meet these criteria has a strong chance of being denied.

Following the approval of the Student Voices committee application and once core guiding principles have been established, the next step was to transform plans into reality. The first phase consisted of recruiting students who might be interested in student-led projects. Initially, the authors recruited only their current and former students, then asked colleagues to advertise to a wider university audience with a description of the committee. Recruitment has since become more effective by utilizing a website and displaying current students' projects as examples of what could be created. After a number of students expressed interest, the first online Zoom

meeting was held, followed by six additional meetings throughout the first year of Student Voices. A total of 35 students attended at least one of these meetings. The authors focused on creating an atmosphere of inclusivity and inspiration while students shared their ideas for possible projects. A number of these student-generated ideas then became actual student-led projects with the guidance of the authors. These projects of various sizes and topics were brainstormed, developed, produced, and shared online. Since there is a variety of types of projects, the Student Voices members have requested and received assistance and contributions from colleagues who are able to provide certain appropriate skill sets and advice based on their specialized experiences. As the number of Student Voices projects has expanded, the more opportunity there is for colleagues to become involved, share ideas, and offer their own guidance and suggestions.

Project Criteria

While it is a prominent feature of Student Voices to allow its students the freedom to produce their own projects, in addition to being aware of the Student Voices principles, there are certain criteria to which each project must adhere. First, each student-led project must be inclusive. To explain further, other students of TIU need to be able to participate, or contribute to the project in at least a minimal way. Next, the projects are required to be ongoing. For example, a project cannot be a one-time event or have an end point; they must be weekly, monthly, or continually developing. The third criterion for the student-led projects is that they need to be realistic. Although Student Voices members are encouraged to dream big and have high expectations of themselves, the projects need to be anchored in what is achievable and practical. In addition, the projects must be educational or enabling. Students cannot simply create something exclusively for their own satisfaction; the projects need to be of service in some way. Finally, the projects and their members must agree to being a part of the Student Voices community.

Current Projects

As of February 2021, there are eight ongoing projects of various sizes in differing stages. The first project, Humans of TIU, consists of enlightening interviews with a wide range of TIU students and faculty according to monthly themes such as the environment or holidays. The next group, Culture Mixing, is a project that shares primarily about Japan's unique way of life and intercultural understanding. Another project, Student Learning Center (SLC) Sempai, focuses on assisting underclassmen with tips for studying English and dealing with general academic challenges. Seeking to reduce the use of plastic on campus, Eco-TIU is a project created to raise awareness of environmental issues. The purpose of the Student Clubs project is to shine a light on lesser-known university clubs and groups through in-depth interviews and articles. Attempting to increase consciousness about social justice issues locally and globally, the Social Justice project creates content through various styles of writing. Since the university consists of international students in addition to students from numerous prefectures in Japan, TIU-Gurashi is designed to aid new students with local recommendations, tips, and life hacks. Finally, two students created a podcast that features thoughtful interviews on meaningful topics and different perspectives. Some project groups have only one student member, while others consist of up to eight members. Most of the projects utilize Instagram or a blog to

share their content; in addition, a Student Voices Google site and Facebook group exist in order to recruit and educate students. Students have used online media almost exclusively to share their projects since COVID-19 forced the university to conduct all classes online.

Impact on Students and University Community

A cursory review of this nouveau committee, Student Voices, reveals diverse impact in a multitude of areas. The resulting impact has so far proven to be rewarding for students, the authors, and the overall university community. In understanding the overall impact of this committee work, a triumvirate has emerged that focuses on: a) development of students' skills and self-esteem in the process of assisting and supporting their student-led projects; b) an increased awareness and motivation for *students* and the school community in knowing that there is now a safe space and opportunity for them to incubate and create whatever projects they wish to pursue; c) inspiration and guidance for departmental colleagues in understanding that new committee ideas can be actualized when pursued strategically and diplomatically.

As students have progressed with various projects, the development of specific skills has occurred. Leadership skill development has been witnessed; for example, planning and setting meeting agendas, meeting facilitation, note-taking, and ensuring the inclusivity of all members of a particular project group. Organizational and time-management skills have been developed in the process of students' formation and progression of their projects; this includes regular meetings and production of timelines with clear goals. For some students, this may be the first time they have actively worked with students representing diverse nationalities and cultural backgrounds. As the student body of TIU consists of students from Japan as well as international students, the collaboration between these groups while working together in student-led projects has resulted in increased intercultural understanding and communication skills.

Furthermore, students have developed advocacy and leadership skills in upholding democratic processes such as making decisions and giving equal responsibilities to all members in project groups. All ideas, voices, and dissenting opinions are intently encouraged by student facilitators within project groups. In relation, student activism and advocacy skills are being developed; the EcoTIU project is allowing students the opportunity to conduct research in hopes of educating and organizing the university community around plastics use and general environmental concerns. Moreover, as EcoTIU develops, implements, and analyzes data-filled surveys about plastics use and the environment, students are attaining valuable skills related to statistical analysis, survey methodology, community activism, and advocacy. While the development of these activism-based skills was not foreseen, this critical engagement and skill building has been invaluable for students.

Students have been able to develop meaningful skills in the area of Social Networking Service (SNS) content development, planning, and publication. Various student-led projects rely on SNS applications and sites to reach a broader population both inside and outside the TIU community.

Numerous skills including student interviewing, transcribing, podcasting, article writing, website development, graphic design, publicity, and outreach have been developed. In fact, this online presence has become an integral part of the student-led projects; students seek to effectively publicize their projects in order to gain a wide audience, and to gain acknowledgement and praise for their work. Finally, in the process of developing their skills through the creation and progression of their projects, as well as receiving peer approval, students have developed immense pride and self-esteem.

Further impact of the new Student Voices committee can be seen on the university community. As outreach for interested students and publicity for ensuing student-led projects increased, more students and staff became aware that there is now a platform in place that allows students to be creative and imaginative, take chances, and pursue meaningful projects. Student Voices is a project-oriented group where students can experiment, take risks and make mistakes. A core principle of this new committee is to create a safe and secure space, face to face and online, where students can meet, collaborate, and create inspirational projects. The authors wished for students to feel comfortable, confident, and secure in producing their work. As the overall university community becomes more aware of the presence and principles of this new committee work, the construction of a progressive, enriching community will continue to progress. Publicizing the student-led projects, which are diverse in their created content, along with outreach to students and staff about Student Voices, has brought notoriety and understanding of the presence of this nouveau committee within the university community. It is becoming widely known that Student Voices is a supportive community where students can cooperate with diverse others, develop skills, and work on whatever it is that they are passionate about.

Future

Although the Student Voices committee developed substantially in its first year, multiple areas for growth and improvement exist. First, recruitment of new student members is vital. The committee and student-led projects cannot exist without adequately and regularly notifying instructors and students throughout the university about the opportunity to join Student Voices. Efforts to raise awareness and recruit have mostly relied upon the authors' direct communication with current and former students, word of mouth, and having colleagues share the Student Voices website with their students. Because the committee is dependent upon other instructors effectively recruiting student members, maintaining harmonious relationships and finding ways to increase authentic buy-in for the Student Voices' vision from colleagues remain constant priorities.

The Student Voices website is a valuable recruiting tool as it contains the Student Voices introduction, information about the committee founders, member contact information, and produced content from each of the existing group projects. Each group has produced a 30-second "elevator pitch" video including a hook to make the audience informed and curious, and an enthusiastic and authentic description of their project. This "elevator pitch" serves as an excellent recruiting tool as well as a creative assignment for the students to organize their project's purpose, configuration, and goals. The most important future step in developing the current projects is to launch a high-quality website that is simple to access and navigate. Since the current

website is rudimentary, an emphasis will be placed on properly displaying the projects' valuable content to ensure that the students' voices are amplified and effectively heard on a wider scale. It is worth noting that students can join at any point of the school year since the projects do not have an endpoint. Therefore, recruitment is ongoing.

Finally, Student Voices aspires to work together with other committees and colleagues to discover opportunities for mutually beneficial collaboration. Since the committee is relatively new, it is still malleable, and sustainable standards can be set. The authors desire to be proactive and earn a reputation for seeking synergistic win-win relationships with other departmental committees. Because Student Voices has only two instructors leading the committee, the potential, available skill sets, and areas of expertise are limited. However, when additional colleagues become willingly involved in a project, such collaboration can benefit everyone. As an example, the Eco-TIU group seeks to inform the university about environmental issues and influence campus policy by eliminating one-time-use plastic products. Other instructors with a background in and passion for environmental awareness were informed of the project and now regularly contribute their time, ideas, and expert feedback. This results in a more well-informed and fruitful student-led project, and allows colleagues to voluntarily and meaningfully contribute to a cause that they genuinely care about. In this way, Student Voices can act as a medium for involved instructors to become more fulfilled by addressing their intrapersonal values, such as having diverse avenues for development. In addition, instructors who offer assistance to Student Voices may increase their feelings of connection and belonging, therefore benefiting their interpersonal values (Ilies et al., 2018). In sum, Student Voices seeks to expand upon these types of win-win collaborations in the future.

Conclusion

The authors' nouveau committee work, Student Voices, was conceived in order to experience meaningful, required university service work. Further, the authors sought to effectively support students' ideas that take the form of content-based projects. In the process of realizing this new committee, mistakes were made, yet successes were achieved. In discussing the conclusion, lessons learned and takeaways will focus on two main areas: how to work with students in cultivating their passions, and how to advocate for a new committee within the department structure.

Addressing the lessons learned from helping students create meaningful projects, the authors have devised a number of general yet crucial takeaways for those hoping to maximize their students' potential. Foremost, an instructor should make a strong effort to mentor rather than lead. Because the focus is on student-led projects, the instructor may guide, and provide suggestions and advice, whereas leading may involve excessive decision-making and control from the instructor. Leading may also foster disempowerment where students' ideas are not properly validated or built upon. When students are able to choose what to do and how to do it, they feel a stronger sense of ownership, accountability, and meaningful investment. In sum, providing the appropriate amount of guidance, motivation, and feedback goes hand in hand with the knowledge that although the scaffolding has been constructed by the instructor, the benefits are best yielded when students themselves make important decisions and have the ultimate say in their projects' direction. Successes rooted in self-

determination may increase students' self-confidence and provide a lifelong template for meaningful achievement and self-actualization.

In addition to ensuring that students are empowered as much as possible, instructors may find value in cooperative goal setting. When students invest their time in creating thoughtful and meaningful goals, they have a clearer vision of the purpose of a project and are aware of how to achieve subsequent objectives and effectively communicate with fellow project members. During this initial process of beginning a project, the goal-setting stage is the best opportunity for instructors to ensure that a strong foundation is set. Thereafter, sound goal setting allows students to feel comfortable and have considerable autonomy in pursuing their projects. The goal-setting process often includes articulating the purpose and motivation of the project, setting short- and long-term goals with specific deadlines, and ensuring that each student is comfortable and confident in his or her role within a group project. Once the instructors and students agree that the goals align with the original motivations of the project, instructors may emphasize that the aim of the projects should be profound and ambitious. However, students should balance these high hopes with being rooted in what is realistically achievable.

The final point to underscore in terms of optimizing student efforts is to provide them with the space to make mistakes, face difficult challenges, and be uncertain about outcomes. Students likely experience enough stress to perform well within the confines of their regular classes, but given the opportunity to create a personal project, they should not be burdened with additional pressure to achieve perfection. What comes with the fulfillment of developing one's own meaningful project includes low-risk and high-reward consequences. Instructors should encourage their students to take chances, be bold, and dare to take a first independent step. They should emphasize that making mistakes is not only acceptable but an opportunity to learn, find a silver lining, and problem-solve. In a context similar to that of Student Voices, students do not receive a poor grade for bravely and creatively expressing themselves if the project is imperfect; instead, they receive constructive criticism, useful feedback and warm encouragement.

Another critical lesson learned in the process of developing the Student Voices committee is the need to recruit students from the university community who are self-motivated, passionate, and accountable. The authors hope that students will earnestly follow through on their project goals. The authors have learned that dedicated and responsible students are needed in order to have an impactful committee. Students who have taken on a leadership role have proven to be paramount, as they are able to inspire their peers while progressing with the project work. Further, students who may appear reserved, but who show potential for growth, should be valued. Ultimately, the Student Voices community will continue to grow because of the involvement of goal-oriented, responsible, ambitious students who wish to collaborate with peers in the creation of student-led projects.

In regards to navigating the university departmental structure in order to plan, propose, and be granted a new committee, several main points should be considered. First, clearly understanding the culture and structure of a given department is critical. The departmental decision-making process, and criteria by which new committee group proposals are granted, should be clearly understood. Attaining sincere buy-in from

both colleagues and superiors is key; without consistent support from peers and supervisors, the process of working toward a new committee will be extremely challenging. Further, support from colleagues in the form of sage advice, technological skills, and hands-on assistance with student-led projects is immeasurably helpful. Notably, acceptance and validation from peers in the process of forming a new committee has allowed the authors to make substantial progress with a sense of pride and purpose.

Creators of a new committee should develop a clear “pitch” for their work. This includes developing a short, thirty-second “elevator pitch” to state to colleagues in passing, and a longer two-minute pitch for a more thorough explanation. The ability to succinctly express a new committee idea and goals to colleagues is critical, as it allows for buy-in and support to follow. Conversely, when not articulated effectively, the new committee idea may not gain support from or be validated by colleagues. When meeting with department directors, crafting a concise written proposal which outlines clear goals is important. Subsequently, when meeting with departmental directors to orally explain and justify your proposal, the authors recommend creating a concise, attractive PowerPoint presentation, and approaching the meeting with complete professionalism; this expresses sincerity to the directors in undertaking this nouveau committee work.

Colleagues have become more knowledgeable about how best to plan, strategize, and advocate for a new committee. As stated earlier, proposing a new committee must take into account the needs of the department, specifically focused on enriching student support and development of students’ academic and professional skills. As a result of the committee proposal being accepted, the process by which the new Student Voices committee came into existence can be understood as having shaped the way in which future colleagues may wish to plan and present their ideal committee work. Mistakes made and successes experienced during this process have allowed the authors’ colleagues to better understand specifically what is needed to advocate successfully for a new committee. In understanding the lessons learned and takeaways, future proposals for nouveau committee work may become a reality.

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