"The bureaucracy is expanding,

to meet the needs of the expanding bureaucracy."

CRAMPING OUR STYLE

The Constraints of Structural Design
on Student Engagement in the Dalhousie Humanities

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Abstract

This project explores the relationship between institutional design and student engagement among the Dalhousie Arts & Social Sciences student community. Specifically, it seeks to articulate and establish the variables over which university officials (and campus organizations) can exercise some control, with the intent of facilitating interaction between organizations and the students they serve.

My research has indicated a number of such variables, both theoretical and operational, that I hope policy makers and student leaders will take into consideration in their current and future efforts to increase levels of engagement. These variables range from (to mention only a few) student load to spatial distribution to bureaucratic over-determination and administrative redundancy, and serve to highlight the strong relationship between the structural design of university organizations and their corresponding levels of student engagement.

Acknowledgments

I have dedicated this project, somewhat ironically, to the students of Dalhousie, who inadvertently inspired me to carry out this research on their behalf.

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Introduction

Problematic

As a former student of two universities, I came to Dalhousie with certain social expectations. Perhaps the most significant of these were my expectations regarding what I will call 'student engagement.' What I mean by this term is an active involvement by students with the formal or informal organizations that constitute the university space. These organizations, or institutions, are extremely diverse, spanning student support and academic services, academic societies, extracurricular clubs and grassroots movements, the student union, the campus newspaper, and so on. Defined as such, I noticed a disparity between the degree and kinds of student engagement I was accustomed to elsewhere, and what I encountered at Dalhousie. For example, at Dalhousie I have observed relatively less engagement with academic societies, but relatively more with the Dalhousie Gazette. I have seen more successful tuition fee protests, but smaller turnouts for varsity sporting events.

The second set of expectations I had concerned the structural and functional design of the university space. In general, university spaces are composed of administrative, political, academic, economic, spatial, support, service and extra-curricular dimensions (as well as doubtless many others). The way in which these dimensions are arranged, related and configured describes the structural and functional design of the university space. For example, the Dalhousie Student Union is charged with administering student clubs and societies; to do so, it has a seven-tiered classification model that explicitly defines the administrative, economic and political relations among these organizations (see Appendix C); to complement this model, there is a clearly articulated policy outlining the conditions that must be met for official ratification. In other universities, administrative responsibility for student clubs and societies may be divided among academic departments, the registrar, or a specific department of student affairs. Furthermore, the funding model for these

organizations may be organized differently, either to proliferate or centralize official revenue streams. The choices that are made (and have been made historically) by any number of formal or informal bodies thus shape the structural and functional design of Dalhousie.

The question ultimately emerged in my mind as to whether there is a correlation between the differences I encountered regarding student engagement, and the differences in structural and functional design that make Dalhousie unique. This question became more pronounced as I began participating in formal organizations and institutions, and became sensitive to issues of engagement within them. Specifically, I asked myself why some formal organizational bodies on the Dalhousie campus attract large amounts of students, while a great many others do not? Is there a kind of predictive or analytic logic that one can apply to forecast whether one's attempts to mobilize students will be successful? What can a study of student engagement as an anthropological phenomenon offer policy makers, students and administrators?

Hypothesis

To address the questions posed above, I investigated the following hypothesis: a relationship exists between, on one hand, the level of student engagement with the formal organizations that comprise Dalhousie University, and on the other, the functional design of these organizations. This relationship may be predicated upon such factors as an organization's purpose, its administrative structure, its perceived image and constituency, the political wherewithal of its members, its economic resources and funding models, its advertising strategies and mode of communication, and so on. Consequently, an in-depth understanding of the dynamics of this relationship, and the factors that mediate it, would prove to be an invaluable resource. It could be applied to improve the current functional design of those

services, organizations and movements that have not been able to successfully engage students, or to gauge the feasibility of a proposed mobilizing strategy.

Theory and Scholarship

This section will introduce and develop my theoretical perspective, beginning at the level of grand-theory and proceeding to literature and concepts that are more specifically related to my research problem. At the most abstract level, I have aligned myself theoretically with a structuralist paradigm. This can be seen from the manner in which I have framed my object and the language I have used to describe the problem: abstract organizational bodies are among the most prominent units of analysis. More to the point, in the causal relationship I seek to establish, the structural and functional design of these organizations is the independent variable, upon which the level of student engagement depends.

However, this is not to say that I relied on a structuralist perspective exclusively while conducting research and interpreting findings. It would be hopelessly reductive to assume that institutional design completely determines student engagement. External variables such as students' individual lived experiences, socio-economic class relations within the university community, and collective cultural impressions and attitudes towards aspects of university life are all likely to influence student engagement. These variables though, as units of analysis, suggest different theoretical emphases (e.g. post-structuralism, political economy and symbolic interactionism). While I was sensitive to the importance of these perspectives in providing a well-rounded interpretation, they remained impractical as frameworks for my research.

For instance, it is curious that in a project that will examine student engagement, I chose to emphasize the structural determinism of the environment over the agency of the students. The post-structural critique compels us to view individual experiences and local narratives as the starting point for ethnographic inquiry.

However, in practice, the application of post-structural research strategies entails a heavy reliance on qualitative and subjective research data. With a student population as large and diverse as the one I proposed to study, a representative sample of qualitative research was simply unfeasible. However, an exclusive reliance on empirical and quantitative data was equally unacceptable, as it generally restricts itself to official discourse. While it would have ultimately been unreasonable to frame this study of student engagement post-structurally, it would have also been irresponsible to ignore the subjective dimensions of my research data and rely strictly on official discourse.

The same observation can be made of the political-economy and symbolic-interactionist paradigms. While a plausible argument could have been (and might still be) made about, say, the relationship between a student's attitude or socio-economic class and his / her levels of engagement, the indicators that would expose this relationship (hometown, tax bracket, number of jobs, feelings towards campus organizations etc.) were outside the research data I could readily attain on a large enough scale. Nevertheless, the relationships between socio-economic or behavioural factors and individual levels of engagement must be acknowledged as external determinants.

When attempting to select an appropriate research framework for this project, I considered mainly two factors: the expected accuracy and relevance of the conclusions it would reach, and the feasibility of the research methodology it would entail. I wanted a framework that would allow me to generalize my findings beyond Dalhousie, while best exploiting the resources to which I had access. As my research data consisted largely of official documents from a variety of campus organizations (and was rounded out by participant observation and open-ended interviews with certain key respondents), structuralism provided the best framework for research: it

allowed me to relate these documents to observable phenomena in the form of organizational bodies and their agents.

Situated thus, the university space is seen primarily as a complex network of organizations. The way in which these organizations relate to each other, and to the student population, became the focus of my research. To frame and understand these relationships, the most helpful, general conceptual tools I considered were Max Weber's notion of rationalization and Charles Tesconi's related notion of bureautechnocracy. The two are heavily humanistic, and are both influenced by German romantic philosophy; nevertheless, regarding the university campus, Weber's observation that the process of modernization leads to a highly rationalized and individualized society is particularly astute. We can expect, as technology advances and the private sector encroaches on the university, that more and more policies for rationalization will be implemented. More and more responsibilities will be downloaded onto the student, to the point where it may eventually be possible to carry out an entire degree programme without interacting with one's peers - a model wherein the only engagement is with the administration of the institution. This concept of rationalization provided an important context to which I remained sensitive throughout my project.

Tesconi's fairly self-explanatory and quite evocative term 'bureautechnocracy' is in a sense an extrapolation of Weber. The most significant idea in his work is the concept of "structural overdetermination", where essentially an institution's bureaucracy and administration become so large, centralized and specialized that they actually prevent the institution from performing its functions (1972, 30). We can see evidence of this kind of overdetermination in the university setting at all levels. Certain organizations' constitutions have consistently prevented them from moving forward on important concerns due to lack of quorum or inactive members. Many student services require long wait times, a good deal of paperwork and

research on the part of the student. The registrar's functions are severely limited by its reliance on information technology and related policies that are hidden from both administrators and students. The list goes on. Suffice it to say, overdetermination is an important factor in determining the level of student engagement. The operational indicators for this variable are of particular interest in my results and analysis.

Some final conceptual tools (whose usefulness actually surfaced during my research) are identity politics and social constructionism, and the related notion of framing as a strategy for mobilization, all under new social movement theory. These concepts were particularly useful in rationalizing administrative idealism and the social construction of student identity, which emerged as important variables after I reflected on my interview data; they will be discussed in further detail below, situated in their proper contexts.

Student engagement is a relatively new field of study in the social sciences, emerging explicitly in the literature mainly in the 21st century. As such, there is a relative paucity of theory - and publications in general - on the subject. The majority of research thus far has been working to amass a body of knowledge (NSSE, 2004). There are three or four national surveys, most prominently Indiana University's National Survey of Student Engagement, and a good deal of research on quantitative methods itself. However, the majority of this literature is empirical and sociological. It was, to some extent, up to me to provide the anthropological theoretical dimension of student engagement.

Most important to this end was the operational definition of the term. Due to the sponsorship of this research by universities, marketing firms and the private sector, student engagement has been defined as an involvement "in empirically derived good educational practices." (Kuh, 2003, 2) In place of this definition, I have suggested "an active involvement by students with the formal or informal organizations that constitute the university space," which is by nature much more

qualitative. I am attempting to depart from the neo-liberal and post-industrial biases and premises that I have found in the literature. Theorists all seem to be in agreement that the student is responsible entirely for his or her involvement in campus life, and that the primary "desired outcomes" of his or her time at university are good grades and good career opportunities. My theoretical alignment compelled me to impute some responsibility for student engagement (as defined by me) to the institution itself, as its organizations hold far greater agency than any given student.

Methodology

Though I undertook to study student engagement at Dalhousie, I cannot claim that my findings apply to the entire student populace. I restricted my research, and thus many of my conclusions, to the undergraduate student body enrolled in the faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. This limited the population to roughly 3000 students, which is somewhat less-diverse and manageable. Furthermore, I was also constrained by the resources I had at my disposal. I relied on archival data from formal channels, such as meeting minutes from university organizations, information from official and social networking websites, and statistical collections such as public surveys conducted by Dalhousie Student Services (2006). Analysis of these sources were, of course, tempered by research methods involving actual respondents. However, due to the size of the population and the resources at hand, certain methods and strategies were simply unfeasible.

I have avoided designs that focus in-depth on a select few respondents as private individuals or "typical" undergraduate arts students, as this would raise questions about the representativeness of my sample. As the operational indicators (such as occupation, schedule, socio-economic class, academic calibre, etc.) that would enable me to select a representative population could not be measured in the resources available to me, I chose to forego panels, focus groups, case studies and life histories. Instead, beyond the empirical and statistical analyses of archival

information, I relied on open-ended interviews with key respondents, and participant observation in public settings such as open meetings and sponsored events.

My programme of research for this project was divided into three broad phases. These were 1) collecting and organizing archival information, 2) observation and participant observation, as well as conducting open-ended interviews with key respondents, and 3) analyzing the data from these qualitative research methods.

In the first phase, I hoped to exhaustively list and relate campus organizations, as well as monitor as many sources of information as I could. I felt that this would help develop background knowledge and understanding that had to be in place to get the most out of interviews with respondents. I thus examined, in particular, the past several years of meeting minutes from both the Dalhousie Student Union and the Dalhousie Arts and Social Sciences Society (which were available publicly) for trends, patterns, and concerns that were relevant to student engagement. In addition, I relied on quantitative findings from Dalhousie Student Services' report, *The Student Experience at Dalhousie,* which provided important population data I would not be able to collect myself*.* To a lesser extent, I also monitored the Dalhousie website, DSU sponsored blogs, the Dal Gazette, and various groups on Facebook.com. My efforts here were to start distinguishing organizations with actively engaged memberships from those that saw little student activity, in order to identify the abstract variables and operational indicators that affect the level of engagement.

In the second phase of research, I conducted a series of open-ended interviews with a number of key informants. These were officials from organizations with large constituencies, such as the Dalhousie Student Union and the Dalhousie Arts and Social Sciences Society who, by the nature of their offices, would have valuable insights and perspectives to offer. The value in selecting these particular individual respondents may be unclear: if I sought to make general statements about the majority of students, why interview those who (by dint of their involvement) were in

the minority? The rationale comes from my theoretical frame: I am working to engage with discourse and respondents at the organizational level, rather than the personal.

I have suggested earlier that, while a host of demographic variables such as age, gender, class, occupation, schedule, major, year of programme, self-perception, attitude towards the university, etc. may determine individual levels of engagement, overall these variables are outweighed by the structural design of the university's organizations. As such, my research design addresses individuals primarily as agents of their respective organizations, and not as private individuals. This approach privileges those individuals who represent organizations (rather than individuals who may or may not engage with campus organizations), because the former have a better chance at achieving representativeness. Observation of the student population at large was restricted to participant observation at university events and organization meetings.

In the final phase, I synthesized all the qualitative data that I gathered through interviews and questionnaires, and tempered it with my empirical analysis. I relied on a simple file system and journal to organize the information. The analysis turned up a number of independent structural-functional variables that affected the level of student engagement experienced by campus organizations. These operational indicators led to abstract and generalized findings, which I hope may eventually be applied predictively to organizational policy by future officials.

Research Ethics

The only ethical issues that arose from this proposed programme of research concerned the respondents of the open-ended interviews. All other interaction with the research object was non-human. In the open-ended interviews, the ethical concern was primarily maintaining anonymity. In many cases a respondent's official title was one-of-a-kind, making it possible to determine his or her identity by

matching the year with the title. I thus identified respondents either by their title (if the remarks were of a neutral nature), or by using more ambiguous and general phrases (for more tendentious comments). In determining the level of identification necessary, the only factor I considered was the potential harm to the respondent - other potential consequences were outside the ethical considerations for which I am responsible as a researcher (AAA, 1998).

In many cases, there were pre-existing relationships between the respondent and I, which needed to be negotiated carefully. As mentioned above, I focused on respondents' official dimensions over all other aspects. If anything, this already-established rapport only helped to this end, as it encouraged a greater level of frankness and openness. An explanation of how responses were to be used, as well as the potential risks, were to be offered both verbally and in writing. Depending on the social context, and the respondent being interviewed, I adapted my verbal explanation of both the project and the ethical concerns to better suit the relationship. Nevertheless, the written statement of informed consent was distributed universally (see Appendix B for an example).

Challenges Encountered During Research

I had originally intended to do two things differently during my research phase. First, I planned on circulating a questionnaire to as many organization officials as possible to gather a broad base of empirical data, in which I hoped to find statistical patterns that would perhaps reveal trends that qualitative research would not. However, having only received one questionnaire back, I abandoned this research strategy, and opted instead to try a more qualitative approach. To this end, I changed my 'semi-structured' interview strategy to a completely open-ended approach. My strategy during interviews was thus to have as natural a conversation as possible, which I opened by describing my research project and asking for the respondent's opinion. I also encouraged respondents to view the interview as a

chance to express what they felt the university at large should know about their experiences as organization officials. I believe this motivated certain respondents to treat the interview as a project in reflection and introspection, as I obtained much more profound and insightful comments than I expected.

I also hoped to engage as wide a cross-section of university organizations as possible. However, it quickly became apparent that formal university organizations were unwilling to participate: correspondence went unanswered and calls went unreturned. I will not claim that I worked as hard as I could to "round-out" my sample of respondents for the open-ended interviews. In fact, once it became clear that student officials were far more willing to participate than university officials, I decided to focus primarily on the student leadership experience, and to generalize my findings from there to the rest of the university. As the reader will note below, this generalization is accompanied by the necessary caveats.

As a project in ethnography, I learned a great deal through the research process, and was at several turns surprised by findings that contradicted what I was (reasonably) certain were foregone conclusions. Ultimately, I am convinced of the value of this project as an ethnographic text, regardless of sampling limitations, as I feel it offers valuable social and cultural insights about the Arts and Social Sciences student community. While this may not be an ethnography of the Dalhousie community at large, the reader will nevertheless find a great deal of insight and subtlety, even within a socio-cultural milieu as limited as the students of one faculty.

Results & Analysis

After conducting my interviews, performing content analysis on a variety of documents, and generalizing and synthesizing the research data, a number of trends emerged relating issues of structural design to student engagement. I have chosen to organize my findings under the general, theoretical variables that I was able to draw from these trends.

Assumptions

Throughout the year, one criticism has surfaced again and again, regarding an unstated assumption that has motivated my research from the outset. I have undertaken this project in large part so that my findings could be employed by leaders of university organizations to help improve their relations with their constituencies. However, in doing this, I have assumed that this outcome is actually desired by these organizations. Depending on one's perspective, one might be skeptical about whether this is actually the case. After all, a disengaged student population reduces accountability and allows for greater freedom for administrators to pursue their own interests. In some cases, it is plausible that certain university organizations (particularly those run professionally or for-profit) may support structural constraints, either tacitly or actively, to obtain this freedom. Nevertheless, I feel this assumption is warranted and perhaps even appropriate, despite its idealism. Whether the findings described below are applied towards policy or not, this project retains its value both as an exercise in anthropology, and as an ethnographic text that may ultimately help future observers understand and explain social and cultural phenomena at Dalhousie.

Having made this clear, I am also compelled to point out the limitations and weaknesses that the reader may find below. These are mainly issues of representation caused by (unavoidable) sampling error. As described in the methodology section above, one of the key challenges I faced was attempting to engage the university administration in my research. As a result, the data from my open-ended interviews has come almost exclusively from student leaders. The conclusions based on qualitative data generalized from these interviews cannot, therefore, be considered representative of all dimensions of the university space. Consequently, in representing and addressing the administration below, my remarks are induced from the comments made by student respondents, and from my analysis

of archival documentation such as the university's website and publications, the Dalhousie Gazette, etc. In summary, the reader should be mindful of the fact that (objectively and statistically) the findings described below will be representative of student-run organizations to a greater degree than they will be of university organizations in general. Nevertheless, this does not preclude the possibility that the variables described below will be both relevant and applicable to the administrative sphere.

Student Load

Advanced capitalist social formations are characterized by increased rationalization and bureaucratization, an observation made widely over a century ago by a number of modern social theorists. Traditionally, this has been a critique of the modern, industrial nation-state as it relates to its citizens: as rationalization increases and the mandates of bureaucracies expand, more and more responsibilities are downloaded to citizens, as more institutions (governmental or otherwise) make demands on individuals' time. Consider how this translates to a typical Canadian citizen: he or she must file taxes, fill out census forms, renew drivers' licenses and passports, keep track of a variety of bills, and so on. In large part, these tasks are designed to facilitate the bureaucratic process at the expense of the individual.

In much the same way, this tendency is reproduced in the university space. Even if we ignore external determinants of individual student engagement (such as occupational or family commitments), the complex network of institutions that comprise the university makes enough demands on students' time to overtax them and discourage additional involvement with university organizations. In fact, this is perhaps the most frequent comment / complaint I have encountered in my interviews with respondents, and even in my review of official, archival documentation such as society minutes.

The statement that "people are just too busy" becomes much more profound when one considers the structural-functional context: currently, the typical student is expected to learn how to use and navigate different kinds of software and information systems to do such simple things as purchase school books, register for classes, manage student loans, interact fully with their classes online through WebCT, etc. Each of these tasks, and countless others, require familiarity with unique information management systems. For example, online registration of courses is done through the Dal Online portal (perhaps in consultation with the Academic Advising services offered through the Registrar), the DalCard system is managed on the Ancillary Services website, and tuition and fee payments are managed through the Student Accounts site, while class websites and discussion groups are hosted at my.dal.ca. First year students also face the challenge of following strict departmental policies when writing their first academic papers, while trying to navigate the Novanet library system, journal databases and online article collections for the first time. These departments and sites organize and collect information in different ways, and students must follow a learning curve to interact with each organization. Sadly, this learning period often coincides with the beginning of the semester, when many campus organizations are out in full force attempting to attract students' attention.

This trend, whereby institutions both inside and outside the university increasingly demand more of individuals in order to facilitate their internal functions, is a natural consequence of modern, "post-industrial" capitalism. As such, *ceteris paribus* we can expect it to become more pronounced over time. Indeed, there is evidence to support this prediction: in January 2007 the Dalhousie Student Union moved its society ratification process completely online (DSU, "Transition Information"). However, if examined from a student's point of view, the process requires that the same criteria be met and the same steps be taken under the new sytem. The administrative decision, then, was made to facilitate the DSU's

bureaucratic process, leaving the students to adapt and essentially 're-learn' how to ratify their clubs and societies. Furthermore, the online process is designed to homogenize the applications received by the DSU: again, facilitating its internal processes while making more work for those organizations whose methods and documents must be updated.

Even at the provincial level, talk has re-surfaced of centralizing university application procedures for all post-secondary institutions in Nova Scotia (LaRoche, 2007). If ever implemented, prospective undergraduates would apply to all Nova Scotia universities through a central website, while still researching their institutions' specific requirements elsewhere. This is, admittedly, a proposal geared towards cutting costs related to application procedures at each university, and is not motivated by the interests of future applicants - in a word, characteristic of the capitalist and rationalist imperative.

While this imperative may be the *de facto* norm, the manner in which the administrative structures at Dalhousie relate to students is a variable that officials can control. Furthermore, we can see evidence of the relationship between the level of student engagement and the degree to which interaction is facilitated by university organizations. Several respondents indicated that they preferred booking events at the Grad House because of the straightforward and simple booking procedures. A significant number of campus organizations avoid ratifying with the DSU every year because they do not wish to adapt their internal structures. In the fall, the president and vice-president of one of the more successful D-level Arts & Social Sciences societies physically visited as many departmental classes as they could to advertise their society and collect email addresses, rather than expecting students to make the extra effort.

The trend here is that, essentially, the less a university organization contributes to student load, the higher the level of student engagement it enjoys. It would thus be

worthwhile for administrators to consider standardizing, centralizing and facilitating their interactions with students to this end - despite the extra costs and efforts associated with doing so.

Red Tape

My above remarks dovetail nicely into a discussion of "red tape," which emerged as a common frustration among my respondents (themselves almost exclusively officials of student clubs and societies). Consider the following scenario from the perspective of one such official. His or her society decides to host a movie showing, and begins to plan the event. (S)he goes to obtain the audio-visual equipment needed to show the movie, and is told by the A/V department that equipment cannot be signed out without booking a room. This same official next tries to find the department in charge of room bookings, discovering it to be Facilities Management. However, the room booking authority informs him or her that they are unable to book the room for a movie showing without copyright permission, obtained by the copyright office. Somewhat frustrated at this point, the student goes to the copyright office to request permission to show a particular film, and to pay the associated fee if necessary. Regrettably, the office informs the official that it is not their policy to deal with student societies - or students at all for that matter - and that a faculty member would be required to obtain copyright permission. At this point, the exasperated student realizes that (s)he must try and convince a professor from the department to "get the ball rolling" if the movie showing is to be ever realized.

This was the experience of one particularly determined respondent trying to negotiate between independent organizations, each with their own processes designed to manage their interaction with the university. We have seen how rationalization can lead to structural over-determination: structures with smaller functions proliferate, reproducing formal, internal logics in each case. The above scenario shows how university organizations are no exception. A/V Services, Facilities

Management and the copyright office perform very specific groups of tasks, and although these tasks can be related through the process of event planning, they are internally structured as independent organizations - resulting in unnecessary breaks in continuity and requiring more effort from event planners.

Another respondent, the vice president of an A-level society, spoke of her almost year-long struggle trying to obtain a liquor-license for certain areas of the Arts & Social Sciences building, for use by the D-level societies under her umbrella. Even after obtaining the support of the Dean of Arts, she described having to write a formal letter and fill out paperwork through both University Services and the Nova Scotia Liquor Corporation. While the NSLC assented in a timely manner, the university administration had yet to issue its response after over a semester. It should be noted that in this case, the respondent was working to facilitate the jobs of D-level officials by eliminating the need to repeatedly apply for a liquor license each time an alcohol-related function was planned. As it stands, D-level officials must obtain the license from University Services, and are forced to purchase their alcohol through University Bar Services, who in turn have an agreement with the DSU-run Grawood Bar to supply all liquor served on campus. For those who are unfamiliar with it, the process is extremely tedious and admittedly discouraging.

So far, we have seen how external over-determination ("red-tape") among different campus organizations can lower the level of student engagement in general. However, internal structural over-determination can have the same effect in certain instances. When internal logics such as formal governing policies are reproduced on a small enough scale, they themselves can impede the functioning of an organization. Consider the following: an A-level society's annual general meeting in February, 2007 was delayed for over twenty minutes as officials canvassed the area surrounding the Student Union Building for students to meet their quorum of 75 members. Another A-level society, with a quorum of 35 to conduct official business,

were similarly delayed in October and March. In two instances, individuals providing security for the building were asked to sign the roll call to meet the quorum, and excused themselves after official business was concluded. Society constitutions can also provide obstacles, as can rigid adherence to rules of order. For organizations of a certain size, they may lead to unnecessary fragmentation and division of duties (e.g. extraneous positions and committees), as well as a preoccupation with observing procedure rather than moving ahead with business. Many respondents were quick to share their frustrations regarding how slowly business moves through council, while participants at general meetings were on occasion both unfamiliar with and intimidated by formal procedure.

I hope to have demonstrated the (intuitive) relationship between "red-tape" (or structural overdetermination) and student engagement. Overdetermination seems to be a consequence of rationalization, inasmuch as it produces smaller and smaller functional units (campus organizations). These units lose sight of the ways in which they integrate with larger processes in the university, while reproducing internal policies to govern themselves, often to an unnecessary extent. There is evidence of the converse as well: two D-level society officials credited their success in part to ignoring their own constitutions whenever they "got in the way," while an A-level society confessed to loaning out its office space freely to D-level members, to circumvent formal room booking procedures. The laundry-list of examples highlights the degree to which overdetermination can influence student engagement.

Accountability

The success of a university organization, as a functional institution within a complex network, depends on its ability to perform its function. We have seen above how internal structural constraints such as quorums and constitutions can impede this functioning. However, in some cases the internal dynamic of an organization can exert comparable influence.

During the 2006-7 academic year, one A-level society's functions came to an abrupt halt for two months when its treasurer stopped performing her duties. As a principal function of an A-level society is to provide grants and funds to D-level societies under its umbrella, these societies in turn had to cancel any events or functions that had any cost associated with them. This chain of events severely affected a number of campus organizations, and by extension, their efforts to engage the student community. The A-level society followed the disciplinary procedures outlined in its constitution, and after several weeks of discussion and deferral (as council meetings are scheduled only twice a month), unanimously voted to impeach the treasurer. Incidents such as this are surprisingly common among student-run organizations. The chair of the same A-level society broke contact with the rest of the council several weeks into the first semester, again without a letter of resignation, apparently suffering physical stress from having taken too much on.

Burnout among society officials is commonplace, as is overburdening oneself with responsibilities. Some do so out of a sense of obligation, others (described by three respondents as "résumé padders") do so to augment their *curriculum vitae*. However, the lack of competition for these positions in many cases results in poorly-motivated candidates. At one A-level society's fall annual general meeting, 10 out of 11 positions were elected by acclamation (running unopposed), while three positions were deferred altogether due to lack of candidates. Furthermore, although 11 positions were elected, there were only 8 candidates: one individual nominated himself for three positions, while another nominated herself for two.

According to the society's constitution, the most serious internal disciplinary actions it can take are impeachment and revocation of honoraria. At the D-level (e.g. academic societies), the only internal disciplinary measure is impeachment. Objectively, these measures do little to enforce accountability. Consulting the Dalhousie University Student Code of Conduct, we see that while "Disruption" is

indeed an offense, the disciplinary body charged with hearing the case is specified ambiguously. One A-level society official recalls having consulted both the Dalhousie Student Union, which is charged with "breaches of discipline relating to student activities under [its] ... supervision," (Dalhousie University, "Discipline") only to be told that disciplinary action against officials of A-level societies is outside its jurisdiction. The case was also not brought before the Senate Disciplinary Committee, as it is charged primarily with regulating offenses of an academic nature. Thus, even though a student did indeed "disrupt, obstruct or adversely affect ... the right of other persons to carry on their legitimate activities, to speak or to associate with others," (Dalhousie University, "Code of Conduct") no authoritative body was willing to hear the case.

Without either more competition for elected positions, or harsher methods of enforcing accountability, there is little that student organizations - or even university departments or services - can do to ensure they function effectively. While most structural solutions are out of students' hands, decreasing the number of elected positions to increase competition, and demonstrating good leadership qualities to inspire colleagues are two strategies that have (in certain cases) met with success. In any case, student engagement is certainly related to accountability, and can be moderated by a variety of structural conditions at all administrative levels.

Social Construction of Identity

In contemporary anthropological parlance, one could call the socially-constructed identity of the Arts & Social Sciences student "multivocal" or "contested". It seems that there is no consensus within the Arts community as to what it means to be an arts student. This is distressing from an ethnographic point of view, as the social construction of identity is one of the fundamental processes that map out a socio-cultural space. In this section I suggest a relationship between a well-defined common student identity and a healthy level of student engagement. While this may

apply on an organizational basis, I will restrict my observations below to the institutional (i.e. general) level.

The social construction of student identity can occur both positively and negatively; that is, by positive association or negative association. In the applied discourse of new social movement theory (based on identity politics and social constructionism), the former is analogous to protagonist framing, while the latter can be likened to antagonist framing (Buechler, 42-3). The best example I can provide relating student engagement to positive association deals with the spatial dimension of the university space. Now ostensibly, it would seem that the physical design of the institution is beyond the control of any administrators, so the effects of building and campus layout on student engagement (whatever they may be) are moot points. However, the distribution of students throughout the campus is indeed an administrative decision with both social and cultural impacts. Whereas many faculties at Dalhousie are spatially insular, restricting most of their classes and activities to a single building, Arts & Social Sciences students are scattered throughout the James Dunn (Math & Physics), Henry Hicks (Arts & Administration) and Marion McCain (Arts & Social Sciences) buildings, as well as the Life Sciences Centre and New Academic Building. The distribution can be so pronounced that one respondent recalled having taken 45% of her Arts courses in the Life Sciences Centre.

By requiring Arts students to traverse all of Carleton campus to attend classes, the administration has inadvertently diluted and fragmented a population that shares social and cultural similarities. With students scattered throughout such a wide space, it is difficult to actively promote or instill a common Arts identity (the notion of the Arts undergraduate as protagonist); the pool of students one interacts with throughout the day is as diverse as the faculties whose buildings one frequents. Furthermore, the lack of access to space in the Arts & Social Sciences building has led arts students to host events regularly in the Student Union Building, Grad House,

and even off-campus. These events - and these student organizations - are thus removed from the space where their visibility could contribute to a sense of familiarity and collegiality among members of the Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences.

This is not to say that positive association is restricted to physically binding a community together; contemporary anthropology cites dozens of examples of global social movement networks, where positive association occurs through commodity trade, activism or simple rhetoric. However, in a setting like Dalhousie, these media of association are much more passive, subtle and limited: it is beyond the mandate of any campus organization - even the university administration - to actively create a "discourse community" around the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. As it pertains to these organizations, negative association is a much more potent process.

By "negative association," I mean the framing of an antagonist through the clear establishment of an in-group and out-group (Buechler, 40-2). This past academic year presents us with an ideal case study. Between March 6 and 8, Dalhousie had a university-wide referendum on a proposed programme of renovation of student spaces on campus. The referendum question asked whether the voter was in favour of an ancillary fee of $10 per class, up to $100 per year, to be collected from each student to fund new and renovated student spaces on campus. The details of the campaign period and the vote were fascinating from a socio-economic, political and ethnographic point of view; however, for the sake of brevity I will present only a few facts to illustrate my point.

On February 28, a large number of high-quality posters appeared on campus, urging students to vote 'yes', and pointing them to yes.dal.ca, a campaign website hosted on the Dalhousie webserver. Neither the website, nor the posters carried any markings indicating their origin, but it became clear that they were sponsored by the Dalhousie administration. It was later revealed that Dalhousie Communications & Marketing spent in excess of $11,000 funding this 'yes' campaign (Gushurst). During

the campaign period, the Dalhousie Student Union released a statement affirming its impartiality towards the referendum. This statement was issued without a cursory review of the popular student sentiment, with the caveat that they would entertain proposals from anyone that wanted to run a 'no' campaign with DSU resources (recall the observations about downloading of responsibility made in 'Student Load'). A number of web pages on the Dalhousie website that allowed feedback were flooded with comments, in large part negative, from students who overwhelmingly felt that the university was coming on too strong with their campaign. The Dalhousie Gazette devoted two separate issues in large part to address the range of (again, largely negative) sentiments surrounding the referendum. During the last two days of the campaign period, 'no' posters began appearing throughout campus. These were posted by the efforts of students working independently from the DSU, many from King's College, whose student body was excluded from the vote regardless of what effect the outcome may have had on their tuition.

In the end, the referendum failed with 57% opposed, and with an overwhelming voter turnout of 28%. Objectively, the issue electrified and polarized the campus, and was extremely effective in mobilizing students. I argue that this was possible because our 'in-group' (the Dalhousie student community) was contrasted against an emergent out-group: the university administration and, to a lesser extent, the impartial student union. This claim earns its legitimacy in the common rhetoric found in student discussions online and in print, as well as the diverse efforts by hundreds of students to protest the 'yes' campaign, whether by making an online post, writing a newspaper article, visiting a blog or putting up renegade posters.

It may be difficult to see how this type of antagonist framing could be of use to policy makers, as the student spaces referendum appears to be an isolated and unique incident. Surely, the university could not in good conscience portray itself negatively simply to have students rally together against it. I thus restrict my

remarks to the Dalhousie Student Union, which I believe could benefit greatly from a more polemic policy.

The Dalhousie Student Union is currently involved in a number of projects through the Canadian Alliance of Student Associations and Alliance of Nova Scotia Student Associations, many at the provincial and national lobbying level. If one looks at their Annual Report, or reads the minutes of their annual general meeting, the references to local activities are surprisingly few in number. Many students feel no connection to the issues that the DSU has taken up, such as the Memorandum of Understanding, national lobbying efforts, sponsored events and discussions, etc. This lack of connection (and its consequent lack of engagement) has emerged as a pattern in DSU Council Meeting discussions throughout the past three years, identified consistently as a problem that needs a policy solution. Having witnessed the potential of antagonist framing firsthand, and demonstrated the relationship between student engagement and student identity, I conclude this section with a statement from a particularly radical respondent: "Whatever the [university] administration says, the DSU should say the opposite. Just on principle."

Idealism

During a particularly enlightening interview, a respondent shared some invaluable realizations he had had while reflecting on the work he had done with his student society throughout the year. Two remarks in particular carry enough ethnographic insight to be reproduced here in their entirety:

> "....They have this grand vision, the administration and the DSU, of what they would like [Dalhousie] to be. People aren't living up to it, and they get pissed off, like it's not their fault, it's the students'. [The low level of student engagement] is *directly* their fault ... stop looking at how the student body *should* be; look at how it *is* and see how you can get student support out of that."

The point the respondent was trying to make is that there is a stark difference between the roles and expected behaviours of students by both student leaders and the administration, versus the students themselves. He (and two other respondents)

cited examples such as the success of the Grad House over the Grawood since its renovations in 2003: "...[you] ... feel gross sitting [in the Grawood] eating your food. It's so dark, I feel like I shouldn't be eating there... When it's empty, you know it's empty. Even with 200 people, it still feels empty."). Another complained bitterly about the administration's vision for the campus through the Imagine '06/'07 campaign, which several faculties, as well as Studley and Sexton Campus, vehemently opposed. Conversely, a D-level society president spoke highly of his A-level umbrella society on the sole merit that it disbursed the funds his society was entitled to promptly and in full, and not because of its stated mission goals.

The principle is quite simple: students will engage more with organizations that represent them and perform the functions they want them to perform. When these organizations make decisions that no longer reflect the expectations of their constituencies, they will experience a lower level of student engagement. The proof of this is found throughout the campus, in the attitudes of all the students that feel indifferent towards the Student Union, an A-level society, or the variety of university organizations whose services go unused.

Structural-Functional Fragmentation

I have discussed two effects of rationalization above, namely the downloading of responsibility to individuals and structural overdetermination. However, the manner in which I framed these observations de-emphasized another related, important consequence of rationalization: fragmentation. We have seen that rationalization engenders structural proliferation and specialization; that is to say, it encourages the creation of smaller functional units with more specific tasks. However (ironically), the manner in which these structures proliferate is not necessarily rational. For example, under a strictly rationalist imperative, Dalhousie would have a single room booking authority for every building on campus; its food services would be handled by a single organization; the printing credit system would be standardized across all

computer labs; the university's online services would be handled through a single log-in page, and so on. The purpose is to eliminate redundancy and increase efficiency.

As it stands, when attempting to book a room for an event, students can opt to approach Facilities Management, the Student Union, the Grawood or the Grad House, all of which offer parallel services in different areas of the campus. The university also offers tutoring services through the Writing Resource Centre, and through an online database similar in function to the DSU's. The list of examples, like many others in this research project, goes on. It is neither efficient, nor essential for university organizations to maintain parallel services. Doing so has two key consequences that come to bear on student engagement: proliferation leads to a diluted pool of talent and resources in each parallel structure, and makes it increasingly difficult for student planners to make simple choices. While the latter point relates back to the notion of facilitating student interaction, the former concerns the availability of quality student services. When a university organization has a unique function, it experiences a higher level of student engagement as it attracts 100% of the students who need its services. Consider, for example, the Dalhousie Gazette, the Advocacy Service or TravelCuts: each offers a unique service, and each is widely engaged by a large cross-section of students, demonstrating that the relationship between fragmentation and student engagement can indeed go in both directions.

Information

One of the predominant characteristics of highly developed, "post-industrial" capitalist social formations is their reliance on a vastly sophisticated information infrastructure. One of the functions of this infrastructure is to disseminate information through a multitude of media. As it applies to student engagement, it

stands to reason that the easier it is to obtain and exchange information about a campus organization, the more likely students will be to engage it.

Consider the evidence for this claim: over the past two years, Dalhousie Student Union elections have been conducted online, and have seen some of the highest voter turnouts in Atlantic Canada as a result (approx. 19% in 2006, 21% in 2007). Close monitoring of the voting period in both years has marked a sharp increase at the time when mass emails are sent to the student body at large, with links to the voting page and instructions on how to vote (Smit, "Day 10 wrap-up"). The student spaces referendum, again conducted online, saw an unprecedented 28% voter turnout, amidst a barrage of information through the Imagine '06/'07 campaigns, postering, web campaigning, online discussions, newspaper coverage, etc. This year's Student Union elections heavily endorsed online campaigning, leading candidates to launch websites, keep blogs, create videos and form virtual communities on social networking sites. A respondent from an A-level society recalled advertising its most successful events by purchasing flyers on the social networking site, Facebook.com (which has an active viewership among the Dalhousie student community of over 13,000 students). These instances all serve to demonstrate the relationship between accessibility of information and student engagement. I trust that the converse needs no explanation beyond the truism that, without advertising, nobody will know you exist.

Conclusion

The variables I have listed in the preceding section cover a wide range of observable phenomena in the university setting. While they are by no means an exhaustive list, they indicate a number of structural patterns with a great deal in common.

It is perhaps most important to recognize the pervasive effects of the rationalist imperative, which are omnipresent in the social and cultural processes of our society.

Rationalization leads to increased student load, structural overdetermination, structural proliferation and fragmentation, all of which come to bear on student engagement. While rationalization is a capitalist imperative, and will likely become more pronounced as capitalism develops further, university administrators possess the ability to place controls on rationalization in the campus. We have seen that it is often in the interest of university organizations to structure themselves irrationally.

A secondary (but nonetheless noteworthy) theme concerns the social construction of student identity. While institutional structures do indeed have a great deal of influence over the development of a student identity, students can still assert their agency through their interactions (or lack thereof) with organizations that seek to represent them. In this way, we see how student identity is negotiated through a dialectical process between the campus organizations that posit their visions of student behaviour, and the assent or refusal of these visions by their constituencies.

At the heart of both these themes is student engagement as a phenomenon. While I have furnished a list of independent variables upon which student engagement depends, the sheer diversity of this list underscores the value of student engagement as a gauge for the socio-cultural health of a university community. Future researchers and policy theorists would do well to approach student engagement as a problematic and a primary unit of analysis. Defined as it has been in this project, it may offer a much richer frame for this emerging (and to date, heavily empirical) field.

Significance of Study

In a relatively new field where much of the research being carried out is empirical and quantitative, and based on post-industrial and neo-liberal visions of the relationship between students and their university, I have chosen to depart from the conventional understandings of "student engagement." I have advanced a notion that has less to do with "good practices" and personal academic performance, and sought

to find and observe its indicators. The analytical frame of this research project will render it much more palatable to social anthropology, where the state of the field is overwhelmingly sociological in discourse and practice.

I have already briefly mentioned the limitations of my research design: the population was restricted to Arts and Social Sciences undergraduates, and the research design was constrained by the availability of information on important social indicators. These factors influenced the ways in which I was able to frame my study, and so there is an emphasis on structuralist theory, sometimes at the expense of the post-structural and political-economic critiques. However, these limitations aside, I am still convinced that the research model was sound, and that the conclusions that I drew from the project can be generalized. I hoped to identify indicators and variables at the operational and abstract levels that act upon the level of student engagement. For the most part, I feel that the variables I have listed should hold true under similar conditions; i.e. we can expect to find that successful organizations will have the same characteristics in other, similar university settings.

Assuming that the findings of this project are indeed generalizable, this study is significant in that it provides a list of operational characteristics that relate strategically to student engagement as an outcome, as well as a predictive understanding of good organizational design within the university setting. These findings may prove invaluable to officials of campus organizations, university policy makers, administrators and students.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Research Ethics Proposal

Title of Project: "Cramping Our Style: The Constraints of Structural Design on Student Engagement in the Dalhousie Humanities"

Submitted by : Ari Najarian
     Instructor : Dr. Robin Oakley (roakley@dal.ca)

Description:
This research project proposes to establish and explore the conjectured relationship between institutional (structural-functional) design and student engagement among undergraduates of the Dalhousie Arts and Social Sciences department. Situated within a structuralist paradigm, I seek to engage university organizations as my primary units of analysis. Human interaction in the context of this research project is thus framed as interaction primarily with representatives of these organizations.

Details on Research Design:
     The research methods that employ human subjects in this project are semi-structured interviews and questionnaires. In both cases, respondents will be selected only if they can be identified as agents or officials of university organizations (e.g. the student union, student clubs, university services, etc.).
     These interviews and surveys will focus on the respondents' experiences in their current capacity, as well as prior experiences and relevant statistical details.
     In the event that part of an interview is quoted in my final report, I will identify respondents either by their title (if the remarks are of a neutral nature), or by using more ambiguous and general phrases (for more tendentious comments). The same measures to safeguard anonymity will be applied toward the questionnaires, which will ask questions regarding the respondent's organizational affiliation and position. In determining the level of identification necessary, the only factor I will consider is the potential harm to the respondent - other potential consequences are outside the ethical considerations for which I am responsible.
     Respondents will be made fully aware of why they were selected, as well as the measures to safeguard their anonymity. They will have the option to discontinue their participation at any time, and will be de-briefed after having completed the interview or questionnaire. This will all be explained verbally, as well as in an informed consent form (Appendix B).

Appendix B: Sample Informed Consent Form

Informed Consent Form -   Honours Seminar,
Dalhousie Dept. of Social Anthropology

Title of Project: "Cramping Our Style: The Constraints of Structural Design on Student Engagement in the Dalhousie Humanities"

   Researcher   : Ari Najarian (ari.najarian@gmail.com)
   Instructor   : Dr. Robin Oakley (robin.oakley@dal.ca)

   Duration   : 45 minutes.

Description:

    This research project explores the relationship between the way Dalhousie University's organizations are set up, and the degree to which students engage them. Your participation in this interview may ultimately benefit the Dalhousie student community at large, as the findings will be made available to student and university officials at all levels of the administration.

Statement:

    I have been informed of the nature of my involvement in this interview or questionnaire. I understand that I can discontinue my participation at any time, and that strict confidentiality will be maintained by maintaining the appropriate level of anonymity. Furthermore, I understand that all data will be stored in a database and deleted upon conclusion of the research. It has been made clear that I will be provided a summary of findings upon request, and will be debriefed after the interview or questionnaire. If I am dissatisfied with the researcher at any step of the process, I am aware that the Professor (Dr. Oakley) or Department Head of Social Anthropology will hear my complaint and act appropriately.

_____   _____

Name of Respondent   Name of Researcher

_____   _____

Signature of Respondent   Signature of Researcher

_____

Date

Appendix C: DSU Classification Schema for Student Societies

	Seat on Council?	Recieve Student Levy?	Faculty Program?	Umbrella Society?	Example
A1	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Arts, Science, Law
A2	No	Yes	Yes	No	Commerce, Pharmacy, Social Work
B	Yes	No	No	No	Native Students' Assc., DalOUT
C1	Yes	Yes	No	No	Womens' Centre, Residence Council
D	No	No	Depends	A or C	History, Bronson House
E	No	No	No	No	CANFAR, Chess Club
F	No	No	No	No	King's College Societies

Appendix D: Poignant Quotes from Respondents (for posterity)

"I'm beginning to think that this is a kind of epidemic, not only at Dalhousie, but in most universities across Canada. It's part of a phenomenon, and it'll have to be addressed soon."

Dalhousie Professor

"I just think that the university could make it more enjoyable for students doing things for other students."

Vice President, A-level Society

"People who want the power are the ones that shouldn't be in it."

Vice-President, D-level Society

"Whatever the administration says, the DSU should say the opposite. Just on principle."

President, D-level Society