CO-CURRICULAR LEARNING:

LEARNING THROUGH EXPERIENCES IN STUDENT GOVERNMENT

by

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ABSTRACT

Co-curricular environments have great potential to enhance learning but when compared to the formal curriculum, there are few studies that have investigated the learning that occurs in out-of-class activities. Despite its significant profile and impact on postsecondary campuses, a dearth of literature addresses experiences associated with student government. This qualitative study used Kolb's (1984) theory of experiential learning as a theoretical framework to guide data collection in order to identify the learning and competencies stemming from participation in student government. The study discovered that participation in student government as an important source of learning that occurred across the six learning domains posited by the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education. The participants self-identified the majority of their learning in the domains interpersonal competence and practical competence. Participants' testimonials illuminate this study and underscore the impact that participation in student government can have on learning and personal transformation.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Learning in university transgresses conventional notions of time and space and occurs both in and outside the classroom (Astin, 1993; Chickering & Reisser, 1993; King, 2003; Kuh, 1993; Kuh, Douglas, Lund, & Ramin Gyurnek, 1994; Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2006; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Indeed, Wilson (1966) and Moffat (1989) estimate that out-of-class, or co-curricular, experiences represent at least half of what students learn in university (Kuh, 1993).

Co-curricular experiences are activities that are outside of the formal, course-related and instructional processes of a college or university (Terenzini, Pascarella, & Blimling, 1996). Examples include informal interactions with faculty and peers, membership in student clubs and organizations, participation in (a) social event(s), living in residence, and playing intercollegiate sports. Importantly, these co-curricular experiences are not superfluous to curriculum covered in courses. There is a compelling body of literature that provides evidence that co-curricular environments in university and college promote and foster learning (Astin, 1993; Baxter Magolda, 1992a; Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Desmarais, Evers, Hazelden, Schnarr, & Whiteside, 2013; King, 2003; Kuh, 1993; Kuh, Douglas, Lund, & Ramin Gyurnek, 1994; Kuh et al., 2006; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). For example, participation in co-curricular activities is known to facilitate the development of critical thinking, leadership and communication skills, as well as humanitarianism and moral reasoning (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). It is skills such as these that Desmarais et al. (2013) argue equip

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graduating students with the competencies necessary to "thrive in the 21st century workplace" (p. 5). According to Howard (1986), participation in co-curricular activities is better than grades when predicting workplace competence.

Unequivocally, learning happens outside the classroom and participation in co-curricular activities contributes to personal and professional development. However, little is known about co-curricular learning when compared to how much is known about the learning that occurs as part of formal, course-related instruction (Kuh, 1993). Using Kolb's theory of experiential learning as the theoretical framework and qualitative methods to guide data collection, this study examined co-curricular learning and specifically aims to uncover the learning and competencies developed as a result of experiences participating in student government.

Accountability, Assessment, and Student Affairs

Shrinking resources, increasing costs, and growing demands for accountability and transparency are a reality for North American colleges and universities (Green, Jones, & Aloi, 2008). In the province of Ontario, there is a renewed focus not only on accountability and transparency, but also for ensuring a quality student experience and achieving measurable outcomes (Rae, 2005). According to Rae, outcomes of higher education in Ontario must contribute meaningful results to individuals, and to the social and economic health of the province. Further, Rae argued that "funding arrangements must reflect the efforts required to achieve those [meaningful] results across a wide range of student programs and institutional characteristics" (p. 56).

All areas of postsecondary institutions need to demonstrate their impact on the student experience and value to the individual student. This includes student affairs departments in colleges and universities. Student affairs departments typically refer to non-academic administrative areas within postsecondary institutions that facilitate a student's entry, registration, engagement, and ultimate success (James, 2010; Sullivan, 2010) and include those functions that support and liaise with student governments, clubs, and organizations (Seifert, Arnold, Burrow, & Brown, 2011). Given that student affairs units exist outside of the core academic function of an institution, they are under particular pressure to demonstrate their impact on the student experience and their value to the individual (Schuh, Upcraft, & Associates, 2001).

What is the impact and value of student affairs? The literature clearly points to student affairs divisions as contributors to student learning (American College Personnel Association [ACPA], 1996; ACPA & National Association of Student Personnel Administrators [NASPA], 2004) and the attainment of skills and competencies required for university graduates (Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education [CAS], 2012; Desmarais et al., 2013).

Learning in Student Affairs

In 1996, the American College Personnel Association (ACPA) underscored the role of student affairs practitioners as educators and called upon them to "intentionally create the conditions that enhance student learning" (1996, p. 1). This was reinforced in 2004 in the ACPA/NASPA publication *Learning Reconsidered: A Campus Wide-Focus on the Student Experience*, which notes that student affairs divisions are "integral to the

learning process because of the opportunities it provides students to learn through action, contemplation, reflection and emotional engagement as well as information acquisition" (p. 12). The ACPA/NASPA task force argued that each institution should be viewed as a seamless system where all resources on campus have a role in the integrated learning of each student; that is, student learning is a shared responsibility of both student and academic affairs units. The ACPA/NASPA task force wrote:

> We have come to understand that learning is far more rich and complicated than some of our predecessors realized when they distinguished and separated learning from student life. Seeing students as their component parts (body, mind, spirit), rather than as an integrated whole, supported the emergence of fragmented college systems and structures - academic affairs to cultivate the intellect, and student affairs to tend the body, emotions, and spirit. The new concept of learning recognizes the essential integration of personal development with learning: it reflects the diverse ways through which students may engage with the task and content of learning (p. 5).

Further, the ACPA/NASPA task force made the case that student learning should prepare students for life, work, and civic participation. Desmarais et al. (2013) argued that co-curricular experiences, if planned intentionally, can play a significant role in learning and preparing students for their transition to work.

How much do student affairs programs and services actually contribute to learning? How do we know that learning has occurred? Given the current interest in accountability and increasing expectations of a university education, these are two important questions to answer. Green et al. (2008) provided the context and the literature that calls to action student affairs divisions to assess learning in programming and services (American Council on Education Studies, 1983; ACPA, 1996; ACPA & NASPA, 2004; Joint Task Force on Student Learning, 1998). The Council for Advancement of

Standards in Higher Education (CAS) has provided a road map for student affairs practitioners to identify and assess learning and the development of skills and competencies.

CAS Learning Outcomes

The CAS is a consortium of professional associations that includes the Canadian Association for College and University Student Services (CACUSS) and provides standards and guidelines for the student affairs and services profession. One such standard guides the assessment of learning in student affairs programs. Initially developed in 2003 and refined in 2009 to reflect the work of *Learning Reconsidered*, CAS's learning and developmental outcomes identify the competencies and skills that a student completing an undergraduate degree should acquire (CAS, 2012).

Given the influence of CAS in higher education, particularly around the identification and assessment of learning, CAS's learning and development outcomes provide the framework for which the data in this study were analyzed. CAS identified six broad categories (or domains) where learning should occur: (a) knowledge acquisition, construction, integration, and application; (b) cognitive complexity; (c) intrapersonal development; (d) interpersonal competence; (e) humanitarianism and civic engagement; and (f) practical competence. CAS further divides each domain into dimensions to allow "for a more focused assessment approach" (p. 23). For example, cognitive complexity is divided into four dimensions, namely: critical thinking, reflective thinking, effective reasoning, and creativity. For the purposes of this study, CAS's dimensions are referred to

as competencies as this is a more familiar and commonly used term. CAS's complete

learning and development outcomes can be found in Appendix A.

Statement of Problem

Learning is being reconsidered in postsecondary institutions to encompass all

experiences, including those that happen both in and outside the classroom. Co-curricular

environments have an enormous potential to enhance learning. However, when compared

to the academic environment, not as much is known about learning outside of the

classroom. Shrinking resources, increasing costs, and growing demands for accountability

and transparency alert those responsible for co-curricular programming and services to

the importance of not only creating conditions that foster and encourage learning, but to

also measure the impact of these programs on learning.

Not all co-curricular experiences have the same impact on learning (Pascarella &

Terenzini, 2005). Much of the research on co-curricular learning focuses on interactions

with peers, interactions with faculty, varsity athletics, residences, fraternities and

sororities, and service involvement/volunteering (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). There is

little research on the impact that participating in student government has on learning. This

is despite the fact that student government is a primary area in "which students are given

the power to author their own opportunities and (it) allows them the place and space to

create their own environment like no other on campus" (Lehr, 2002, p. 8). Elected by, and

accountable to, an institution's general student population, student governments play an

important role in representing and advocating the needs and interests of students to the

institution's administration and in some cases municipal, provincial, and federal

governments. Many student governments are funded through a student levy and are responsible for planning campus activities and events, and for providing student services such as health plans. After a review of the literature, only one source of Canadian literature was found that specifically addressed the learning that happens as a result of participating in student government (Desmarais et al., 2013).

Purpose of the Study

The overall purpose of this study was to examine what students self-identify as learned from their experiences participating in student government. Through semi-structured interview questions posed to executive members of a university student government in Ontario, three broad objectives were sought. The study attempted to determine: (a) if students self-identified learning as a result of their experiences in student government; (b) what did students self-identify as learned as a result of their experiences in student government; and (c) what experiences in student government lead to learning.

Researcher's Interest

My role working with student governments fuelled my interest in conducting this research. Serving as a staff advisor to a university student government for 5 years provided a unique opportunity to view the inner-workings and dynamics of the student organization. Each year, I was astounded by the commitment, perseverance, and integrity that many of the student representatives demonstrated in their roles. In the case of this particular organization, the student representatives were volunteers; many of them balanced their student government responsibility with full course loads, part-time jobs, and family and personal commitments. The student leaders faced numerous challenges

throughout the year, mostly around managing their time and competing priorities, interpersonal conflicts, and the many ups and downs of student life. Despite these challenges, the overwhelming feeling among the student leaders at our final meeting of the year was that their experience in student government was positive and for many, the experience was one of their most significant ones at university. As their advisor, I also witnessed and marveled at each student leader's personal growth, resilience, and skills she or he developed over the course of their terms. It was clear to me that their experiences in student government were having a profound impact; they ended their mandates with significantly more confidence, skills, and abilities than when they started. At the core of this research was my interest in documenting these observations and to contribute to the literature in co-curricular learning specifically around student governments where little currently exists.

Research Questions

Three research questions guided the study:

1. Do students learn from their participation in student government?

2. What do students learn from their participation in student government?

3. What types of experiences lead to learning?

Significance of the Study

This research uncovers and qualifies the learning that occurs through experiences participating in student government. Broadly, these findings contribute to the current body of Canadian research on co-curricular learning, particularly the learning that happens as a result of participating in student government.

Kuh (1995) encouraged studies, such as this one, that attempt to understand the learning that may occur through co-curricular experiences. Identifying which out-of-class experiences lead to specific outcomes has practical applications for both institutions and the individual learners themselves (Kuh, 1995). Specifically for institutions, this information can inform student affairs departments in the development of policies and strategies for programs aimed at enhancing learning and can also be beneficial for decision makers responsible for allocating resources. Just as important, this information can assist students in making informed decisions about where to devote out-of-class activities based on the skills and competencies they may gain. This is valuable to students in supporting their transition to the world of work and graduate studies at a time when more employers and admissions committees are asking for examples of where various competencies were attained.

Definition of Terms

The following terms are used throughout this study and have the meaning set forth below:

- The *Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education* (CAS) is a consortium of professional associations—including the Canadian Association for College and University Student Services (CACUSS)—that provides standards and guidelines for the student affairs and services profession.
- The *CAS learning and developmental outcomes* are the standard learning outcomes that students should accomplish as a result of their higher education experiences.

- *Co-curricular* refers to structured and unstructured activities that are not directly part of an institution's formal course-related and/or instructional processes. For the purposes of this study co-curricular is synonymous with the terms "out-of-class" and "extracurricular."

- *Experiential learning* refers to the model of learning constructed by David A. Kolb in 1984. Kolb's theory describes learning as a four-stage cycle that creates knowledge through the transformation of experiences.

- *(Learning) domains* are the six broad categories of learning and development outcomes constructed by CAS. The six domains are: knowledge acquisition, construction, integration, and application; cognitive complexity; intrapersonal development; interpersonal competence; humanitarianism and civic engagement; and practical competence.

- *(Learning) dimensions* are the further classification of each of the six learning domains. For example, cognitive complexity is divided into four dimensions, namely: critical thinking, reflective thinking, effective reasoning, and creativity.

- *Learning competencies* is synonymous with the (learning) dimensions for the purposes of this research.

- *Student affairs departments* typically refer to non-academic administrative areas within postsecondary institutions.

- *Student Association (SA)* refers to the student government of the small urban university in Ontario whose members served as the study group for this investigation.

- *Student governments* are organizations made up of elected student representatives whose role in postsecondary institutions include: representing and advocating for student needs and interests; planning campus activities and events; and providing services such as health plans. Student governments are also known as student unions, student associations, and student councils.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

This chapter will provide a review of the literature in order to establish the foundation and context for this study. The chapter is divided into two sections. The first section provides an overview of Kolb's theory of experiential learning and the second section presents discoveries in the literature about learning that occurs as a result of participating in student government and related co-curricular experiences.

Kolb's Theory of Experiential Learning

In this investigation, how one learns through experiences participating in student government was explained through the lens of Kolb's theory of experiential learning. Kolb's theory is commonly accepted by scholars and widely used by educational practitioners to frame experiential learning or how one "learns through doing" (Shea, 2010, p. 2; Bergsteiner, Avery, & Neumann, 2010; Evans, Forney, & Guido-Dibrito, 1998; Healey & Jenkins, 2000; Kayes, 2002; King, 2003; Merriam & Caferella, 1999; Vince, 1998).

Kolb's theory emphasizes the role that experiences play in the learning process. Kolb (1984) defined learning as "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (p. 38) and described learning as a major process of human adaptation that involves the integration of thinking, feeling, perceiving, and behaving as a whole person. When considered in this context, learning is boundless and "occurs in all human settings, from schools, to the workplace, from the research laboratory to the management board room, in personal relationships and the aisles of the local grocery" (Kolb, 1984, p. 32). In this approach to student learning, the learner works actively and

often collaboratively with others to make sense of her or his experiences rather than passively accepting knowledge or truth from others such as faculty members. The process of making personal sense and meaning from an experience enables the learner to adapt and function more effectively (King, 2003).

Kolb's theory is rooted in the work of Dewey, Lewin, and Piaget. According to Kolb (1984), John Dewey was the most influential educational theorist of the 20th century and his work laid the foundation for experiential learning in higher education (e.g., apprenticeships, internships, work/study programs, co-operative education, etc.). In his book *Experience and Education*, Dewey (1938) explained role of experience in education and suggested that "all genuine education comes about through experience" (p. 13). According to Dewey, the principles of continuity and interaction must be present in an experience in order for it to facilitate learning. Merriam and Caffarella (1999) explained that for an experience to have continuity, it must facilitate the learner's ability to connect what they have learned from a current experience to past experiences as well as possible future ones. The principle of interaction states that in order for an experience to facilitate learning, there must be a transaction between the learners and their environment (Dewey, 1938).

The role of the interaction between a person and her or his environment in learning is embodied by Kurt Lewin's (1951) theoretical formula (B=f(P,E)) that describes behaviour as a function of the person and the environment. Lewin provided a focus on the "the integration of theory and practice" (Kolb, 1984, p. 9), and described a learning model that begins with a "here-and-now" concrete experience followed by the

formation of abstract concepts about the experience, and finally the testing of the abstract concepts in new situations.

Jean Piaget's (1972) model of learning and cognitive development reflected similarities to Dewey and Lewin's theories. Piaget's theory described the role that experience plays in intellectual development, specifically the interaction between an individual and her or his environment in the cognitive development process. The notions of experience and concept, reflection, and action are reflected in Piaget's theory.

Kolb's cycle of experiential learning. Kolb constructed his theory of experiential learning from the learning models described above. Kolb's model differs from other learning theories (e.g., behaviourist theories) as it views learning as a process rather than an outcome or an entity that needs to be acquired. In Kolb's model, knowledge is continuously being created and recreated through the transformation of experience. According to Kolb's theory, individuals do not enter into learning situations with a 'blank slate'; rather, they enter them with at least some idea of the topic at hand, disposing or modifying old ideas as new ones emerge.

Kolb (1984) described learning as a cyclical process that moves through four phases: (a) concrete experience; (b) reflective observation; (c) abstract conceptualization; and (d) active experimentation. The action that is taken in the final stage (i.e. active experimentation) becomes a new set of concrete experiences that then begins the cycle again (see Figure 2.1).
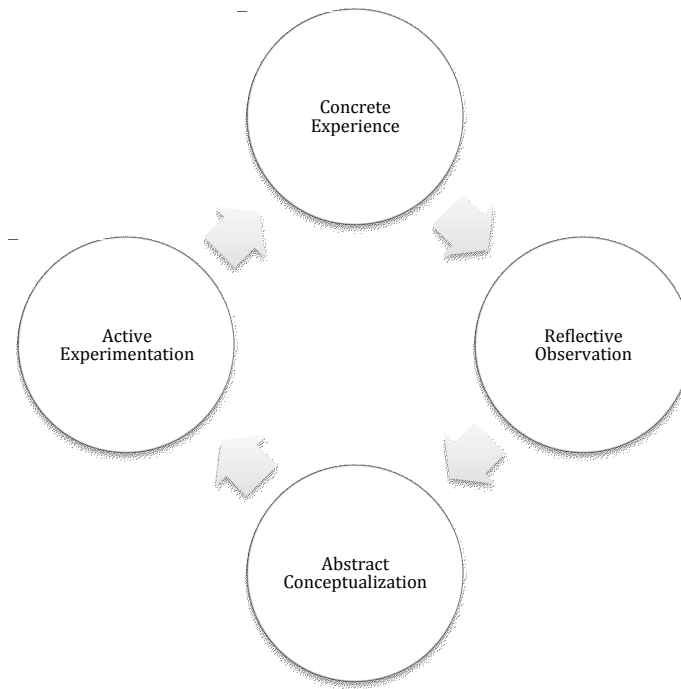
Figure 2.1. Kolb's model of experiential learning.

Concrete experiences serve as the basis for experiential learning. In this phase, a learner must openly involve himself or herself fully in an experience. According to Kolb (1984),

> immediate personal experience is the focal point for learning, giving life, texture, and subjective personal meaning to abstract concepts and at the same time providing a concrete, publically shared reference point for testing the implications and validity of ideas created during the learning process. (p. 21)

Through the reflective observation phase, the learner begins to make personal sense of the experience and reflects on the experience from various perspectives. It is these reflections that lead to the next phase, abstract conceptualization, whereby the learners create sound hypotheses, implications, and/or strategies for actions from their observations. Finally, in the active experimentation phase, the learners are provided an

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opportunity to practice their hypotheses, implications and/or strategies in new experiences, which in turn itself, becomes a new concrete experience (Kolb, 1984).

Critiques of Kolb. Despite Kolb's model being anchored in the intellectual work of John Dewey, Kurt Lewin, and Jean Piaget, there are critiques. The majority of criticisms argue that Kolb's model does not consider the learner's context and places the learning process in a vacuum. By ignoring the learner's context, many factors that influence learning and the individual learner (eg., issues of power and psychodynamics) are also ignored (Kayes, 2002; Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007; Shea, 2010; Vince, 1998). These criticisms are acknowledged and included in the limitations section in the final chapter. However, Kolb's theory provides a framework from which to examine how learning could occur through experiences in student government. Specifically in this study, data was collected through interviews and as noted in Chapter 5, the interview process itself seemed to move participants through Kolb's cycle.

Co-curricular Learning

A review of the literature was conducted in order to discover what is understood and has been written generally about co-curricular learning and specifically about the learning that occurs as a result of participating in student government and related co-curricular experiences.

Co-curricular experiences are activities that are outside of the formal, course-related and instructional processes of a college or university (Terenzini et al., 1996). A number of scholars advocate not only for the existence of learning in the curriculum, but also the potential that the co-curricular environment has on enhancing the overall learning

experiences of students in higher education (Astin, 1993; Chickering & Reisser, 1993; King, 2003; Kuh, 1993; Kuh et al., 1994; Kuh et al,, 2006; Kuh et al., 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Specifically, involvement in co-curricular activities has been found to positively impact interpersonal skills such as teamwork and communication (Floerchinger, 1988); practical competence (Floerchinger, 1988; Kuh, 1993); personal competence (Kuh, 1993); moral and ethical development (Finger, Borduin, & Baumstark, 1992; Lind, 1997; Rest & Narvaez, 1991); cognitive complexity, knowledge, and academic skills, and altruism and esthetic appreciation (Kuh 1993). Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) state that a significant amount of job-relevant skill development takes place in informal co-curricular settings.

Kuh (1995) writes that understanding co-curricular learning is relevant. Identifying which out-of-class experiences lead to specific outcomes has practical applications for both institutions and the individual learners themselves (Kuh, 1995). This information can help institutions make informed decisions about programs and services offered, and help students make informed decisions on how to prioritize out-of-class activities. Much of the research on co-curricular learning focuses on interactions with peers, interactions with faculty, varsity athletics, residences, fraternities and sororities, and service involvement/volunteering (Pascarella & Terenzini 2005). There is little research on the impact that participating in student government has on learning. After a thorough literature search, 13 North American studies were found that touched upon the learning that happens as a result of participating in student government, only 1 of these studies was Canadian (Desmarais et al., 2013).

There is little written about the learning that results from participation in student government. The scope of literature presented next does not focus solely on what is known about learning in student government, it also provides an overview of what is known about learning in co-curricular activities that are similar to and/or related to student government.

Learning in student government and student organizations. A relatively early study by Gay Carpenter in 1972 found that university students involved in student government viewed their experiences as educational rather than leisure activities. In fact, the majority of students interviewed for the study became involved in student government because they saw the potential to learn and gain new skills and viewed their involvement as preparation for their careers. One of the respondents shared:

> I find my involvement in the A.S. [Associated Students student union] and other areas as fundamentally important to my concept of education. I am convinced that college as a classroom experience is too narrow for full development and as such ends up an irrelevant experience for many talented persons. Working in the A.S. seems to be the last chance a young man or woman has to risk himself with responsibilities and have the opportunity to experiment and fail with no strings attached before the pressures of salary and occupation make such experimentation and failure too risky to experience. (p. 16)

Kuh (1993) was a rich and germane source of findings. In this study, 149 senior students were interviewed across 12 postsecondary institutions in the United States. The students were selected because of their range of experiences; that is, some were actively involved and others were representative of the average student at each particular institution. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews that were designed to elicit the most important things that the participants felt they learned during college. From

the interview transcripts, a taxonomy of 13 outcome categories was constructed and then categorized into five learning domains.

The findings from Kuh (1993) study led to two directly related studies, namely Kuh (1995) and Kuh and Lund (1994). In Kuh (1995), the interviews of senior students who held various leadership experiences, including experiences in student government, were analyzed to uncover what was learned specifically from these experiences. Leadership experiences were found to be rich in learning. When compared to other co-curricular experiences, leadership positions accounted for almost 50% of all gains in practical competence (e.g., decision-making ability, organizational skills, budgeting and employment skills); 21% of all gains in interpersonal competence (e.g., self-awareness, self-directedness, confidence, and social competence); and 18% of all gains in humanitarianism (e.g., interest in the welfare of others, awareness of and empathy and respect for the needs of others, and tolerance and acceptance of others).

In Kuh and Lund (1994), the interviews of seniors who had student government experience were analyzed further. Students who participated in student government reported that most of their learning was in the development of practical competence and confidence in working with others. These findings are supported by Desmarais et al. (2013), Schuh and Laverty (1983), and Lehr (2002).

Kuh and Lund (1994) expressed disappointment that relatively few students pointed to their involvement in student government as instrumental in deepening their humanitarian interests. While the authors write that it is possible that the respondents already had a deep sense of care, they still expressed disappointment that this sense did not deepen as a result of the experience. This finding was in contrast to Pascarella,

Ethington, and Smart's (1988) findings which concluded that social leadership experiences were the single most important factor in contributing to the development of humanitarian interests. Schuh and Laverty (1983) in turn found that college graduates who were involved in campus governance often become involved in civic affairs later in life, while Kuh et al. (1991) point to a heightened sense of awareness of the needs of others as result of working in student government.

Kuh and Lund (1994) also point out that participation in student government can contribute to the development of self-confidence and self-esteem. Some gain was also made in cognitive complexity (e.g., reflective thought and knowledge application) and knowledge and academic skills (e.g., knowledge in course-related material and study and writing skills). Schwartz (1991) reported that student leaders who experience campus controversy in student government have an enhanced sense of moral awareness and personal responsibility due to this experience. Other studies report that holding a position in student government can positively impact leadership skill development as well as the ability to influence others (Antonio, 2000; Astin, 1993; Desmarais et al., 2013; Smart, Ethington, Riggs, & Thompson, 2002).

Finally, some studies point to increased critical thinking and communication skills in students who were involved in campus clubs and organizations (Astin, 1993; Baxter Magolda, 1992a, 1992b; Desmarais et al., 2013; Terenzini, Spinger, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1994). In addition to communication skills, Huang and Chang (2004)'s study about students participating in student organizations also found gains in cognitive skills, self-confidence, and interpersonal skills.

Learning experiences related to student government. Experiences that foster interaction between peers, interaction with faculty, and interaction between diverse individuals are reported to impact learning. Participating in student government facilitates such interactions and so the literature surrounding these experiences is reported next.

Interaction with peers. As defined by Pascarella and Terenzini (2005), this category involves socializing with peers, discussing current issues with peers, and having serious discussions with peers who share different interests, values, and life philosophies. By nature, student governments provide a forum where diverse groups of peers interact socially and professionally, making an overview of literature in this category relevant.

The positive impact that interacting with peers has on learning is tremendous and cannot be overemphasized. Through their literature review, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) found that there is a significant number of studies (e.g., Aleman, 1994, 1997; Baxter Magolda, 1992a; Kuh, 1995; Lamport, 1994; Love & Goodsell Love, 1995; Moffatt, 1991; Rendon & Jalomo, 1993; Terenzini et al., 1996) that suggest that the influence that peers have on learning extends beyond the classroom and "because much learning is socially based, then students' social and extracurricular involvements have important implications for what is learned in college" (p. 120). In fact, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) suggest that peer interactions have a dominant influence on learning.

Specifically, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) highlight a consistent body of research that indicates peers play a substantial role in a student's cognitive growth and intellectual development, including positive effects in critical thinking, general cognition, and analytical and intellectual competencies. Particularly, gains in cognitive complexity

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were made when discussing academics outside of the classroom (Arnold, Kuh, Vesper, & Schuh, 1993; Astin, 1993; Franklin, 1995; Kaufman & Creamer, 1991; Kim, 2002; Kuh et al., 1991; Li, Long, & Simpson, 1999; Prendergrast, 1998; Terenzini, Springer, Pascarella, & Nora, 1995; Terenzini et al., 1994; Volkwein & Carborne, 1994; Watson & Kuh, 1996; Whitt, Edison, Pascarella, Nora, & Terenzini, 1999). Kuh (1995) reported that peer interactions were instrumental in the development of interpersonal competence and humanitarianism. In addition, Whitt et al. (1999) found that informal interactions with peers positively impacted gains in career preparation.

The impact of peer interactions on moral reasoning is mixed. On one hand some studies indicate that some peer interactions have a positive impact on moral reasoning (Finger et al., 1992; Lind, 1997; Rest & Narvaez, 1991). On the other hand, studies that looked at peer interactions in fraternities and sororities, such as McCabe and Trevino (1997), demonstrated a negative impact on principled moral reasoning and academic dishonesty. Similarly, Anaya (1996, 1999), Astin (1993), and Williams (1996) found that not all peer interactions have positive impacts on learning. Peer interactions that do not reinforce academic programs can negatively impact knowledge acquisition and academic skills.

Interactions with faculty. Involvement in student government also requires that most student politicians interact with faculty. According to Kuh and Hu (1999) and Pascarella and Terenzini (1991), the frequency of informal interaction between students and faculty may not be as important to learning as the focus of that interaction. Interactions that have an intellectual or academic focus seem to have a greater impact

than exchanges that are social in nature. However, the majority of research indicates that even faculty–student interactions that focus on issues of student development and personal development have a positive impact on cognitive and intellectual development (Astin, 1993; Dey, 1991; Franklin, 1993; Frost, 1991; Ishiyama, 2002; Kim, 1996, 2000; Kitchener, Wood, & Jensen, 1999; Kuh, 1995; Terenzini et al., 1994). Specifically, faculty–student interactions that focus on issues of student development and/or classroom material positively impacted reflective and critical thinking, intellectual development, and problem solving (Astin, 1993; Franklin, 1995; Kim, 1996; Kitchener et al., 1999). Further, Astin (1993) found that students' self-reported development in job and transferable skills was enhanced through informal conversations with faculty.

According to Kuh (1995), interactions with faculty outside of the classroom only resulted in 5% of all gains in outcomes when compared to experiences such as leadership experiences, peer interactions, and out-of-class related activities. Finally, McNeel (1994) found that students who interacted with faculty outside of the classroom reported positive gains in principled moral reasoning.

Diversity experiences. Diversity experiences include activities such as discussing racial, political, and religious issues, socializing with someone from a different racial-ethnic group, or attending an ethno-cultural workshop (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Participating in student government facilitates individuals working and socializing with people of different racial-ethnic groups, ages, abilities, et cetera. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) summarized that diversity experiences had a positive impact on learning, cognitive development, and the development of career-related competencies.

According to Friedlander and MacDougall (1992), the greater the breadth of contacts students have with students who differ from them in terms of age, ethnicity, philosophy of life, political and religious beliefs, and nationality, the greater the progress they reported making toward becoming aware of different philosophies, cultures, and ways of life, which overall led to a better understanding of others and the ability to get along with different kinds of people. Astin (1993) found that socializing with students from different racial and ethnic groups influenced the way in which students perceived their growth in job-related and leadership skills and student learning.

Dey (1991) reported that discussing racial/ethnic issues had a self-reported positive effect on three measures of cognitive development: (a) critical thinking, (b) analytical problem solving skills, and (c) the analytical subtest score on the Graduate Recorded Examination. This finding was supported by Terenzini et al. (1994). Additionally, Kitchener et al. (2002) reported growth in reflective thinking when students made friends and had discussions with students whose race was different from their own. Whitt et al. (1999) concluded that co-curricular interactions with peers that involved discourse around religion, politics, nationality, and philosophy had a self-reported positive impact on career preparation. This finding was supported by Gurin (1999).

Finally and not surprisingly, there are many studies that indicate that having friends of another race and participating in an interracial friendship group leads to positive and significant racial–ethic attitudes and values (Antonio, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001; Asada, Swank, & Goldey, 2003; Hurtado, Carter, & Sharp, 1995; Smith, 1993; Wright, Aron, McLaughlin-Volpe, & Ropp, 1997).

Chapter Three: Methodology

To understand the learning that occurs through experiences in student government, I interviewed 14 members from the student government of a small (approximately 3,000 students) urban university in Ontario. I chose a qualitative method within the social constructivist perspective to collect and analyze the data. This kind of approach uses inductive processes and recognizes that individuals construct their own meanings from social situations (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000; Crotty, 1998).

Locating the methodology within social constructivism resonated with me as a researcher. Uncovering how each participant made meaning of her or his experiences in the Student Association was central to this research and of significant importance and interest to me given my personal experiences working with leaders of student government and my intent in capturing their personal stories of growth and development through formal research.

Beyond my own interest, this methodology was chosen because it aligns with experiential learning theory as it too is situated within the constructivist paradigm. In Kolb's (1984) theory, knowledge is created and recreated through the learner's social and personal experiences. By utilizing constructivist methodology, the learning process as described by Kolb, is further understood and applied to how one learns as a result of participating in student government.

Finally, the constructivist approach was chosen to also ensure that the student voice was heard and reflected. This aspect is critical if the findings are to be used by student affairs units to develop policies and strategies for programs that foster learning

and the students themselves when choosing where to devote their out-of-class experiences.

Participants

Participants for this study were members of a student government in a small urban institution in Ontario. To maintain confidentiality and to protect the anonymity of the participants, the name and location of the institution is not provided. Additionally, the generic term Student Association (SA) will be used instead of the actual name of the student government. The SA's constitution with identifiers removed is included in Appendix B. According to its constitution (retrieved from the Student Association's website in 2011), the SA's mandate was:

1. to represent all students of the university;

2. to foster a sense of community among the university's students;

3. to raise, discuss, and act upon issues of concern to students attending the university; and

4. to create and/or take part in academic or social events that facilitates learning and promotes the betterment of student life at the university.

The general student population elected members of this particular SA for a 1-year term that began in May 2008. There were 19 positions in total. Four positions comprised the executive body and the remaining positions were program representatives. According to the group's constitution, the executive positions were responsible for the overall functioning of the SA such as group coordination and leadership, budgeting and finance, communications, general student representation, and community programing. Program

representatives planned social and educational events and represented program-specific

interests and concerns. The SA had an annual operating budget of approximately $20,000.

Of the 19 members of the 2008-2009 SA who were invited to participate, 14 chose

to participate in the study. Of those participants, three were executive positions and 11

were program representatives. Of the 14 participants, nine were female and five were

male, eight were of South-East Asian descent and six were Caucasian. The demographics

of the participants reflected that of the general student population of the institution.

Ethics

An ethics proposal was submitted and approved by the Interdisciplinary

Committee on Ethics in Human Research at Memorial University and the institution to

which the SA was associated. The letters of Informed Consent are included in Appendix

C. Every effort was made, as described below, to acknowledge and address the following

ethical issues: potential harms and benefits, storage of data, voluntary consent, free and

informed consent, anonymity, and confidentiality.

Data Collection

All 19 members of the 2008-2009 SA were sent a letter via email inviting them to

participate in the study (see Appendix D). The letter included information in order to

facilitate their informed consent should they agree to participate. It included information

about the study and my efforts to limit harm and protect their anonymity. The letter also

underscored that they were free to choose to participate and if they chose not to, it would

not be held against them in anyway. Fourteen of the 19 chose to participate. Prior to the

interviews, the participants who voluntarily agreed to participate, received a letter from

me outlining the purpose of the study as well as the topics to be discussed in the interview, allowing students ample time to consider the topic (see Appendix E). I conducted the interviews after the 2008-2009 SA's term in the fall of 2009.

In keeping with the social constructivist paradigm, I chose to conduct interviews as my method for data collection as the interview embodies the "centrality of human interaction for knowledge production, and emphasizes the social situatedness of research data" (Cohen et al., 2000, p. 266). Importantly, the interview process allows participants "to discuss their interpretations of the world in which they live, and to express how they regard situations from their own point of view" (Cohen et al., 2000, p. 266). In this study, the interviews were planned with the aim of uncovering how students construct their own meaning from their experiences in the SA by eliciting information through probes rather than questions about specific learning outcomes. Using probes rather than specific questions minimized my "presuppositions and constructions on the data" (Crotty, 1998, p.83) and is consistent to the approach taken in Kuh's (1993) study. The probes were designed to guide the conversation and draw out the participants' most significant experiences. The probes were:

1. Why did you want to become part of the SA?

2. Did you set any goals prior to your term in the SA? Did you meet them?

3. What were your responsibilities?

4. Did you take on any special tasks/projects that were outside of your normal responsibilities?

5. What were the most significant experience(s) or major highlights working on the SA? What did you learn from them?

6. Tell me about some of the challenges or low points during your term? What did you learn from them?

7. What are the successes/achievements that you are most proud of from your work on the SA? What did you learn from them?

8. Did you make any mistakes? Have any failures? Experiences that could have gone better? What did you learn?

9. Tell me about your experiences working with others. What did you learn from them?

10. How are you different as a result of your experiences working on the SA?

11. What, if anything, would you do differently if given the opportunity?

12. Do you have anything else to add about your overall experience and how you make meaning from and learned from it?

Stem questions were created to further the conversation, delve deeper into the topic, and to ensure the participants highlighted what they had learned from their experiences on the SA. The stem questions were not provided prior to the interview. Stem questions were optional and were used at my discretion. The probes and stem questions are included in the Appendix F. Pre-testing occurred when the questions were tested first on two students who held leadership roles at the same institution but not in the SA.

Interviews ranged from 45 to 90 minutes in length. Audio recordings were made of each of the interviews and transcribed verbatim. A third-party transcription company was hired to transcribe the interviews. A single employee of the latter company signed a confidentiality agreement and transcribed each of the interviews. The company destroyed its copy of the audio recordings once the transcriptions were completed. I

kept a single master copy of the audio recordings in an encrypted digital file on a

password-protected computer.

Data Analysis

Cohen et al., (2000), provided me with the steps necessary to analyze the data

from the interviews. The interview transcripts were examined to identify what students

reported as meaningful and learned from what they shared as their most significant

experiences as well as their reflections on the experience as a whole. This information

(i.e. specific reflections and experiences) was mapped to the corresponding CAS learning

competency. In many cases, a single experience or reflection was correlated to more than

one competency.

Take for example the following reflection from one of the participants:

I never let something become more important than something else. I also never
took advantage [of my commitments] like I never said that, "oh I am on the
[Student Association] and I have to do this so my social life can wait." Everything
stayed important and in perspective.

This reflection was corresponded to the following competencies: *reflective thinking;*

realistic self-appraisal, self-understanding, and self-respect; pursuing goals; managing

*personal affa*irs, *demonstrating professionalism, and living a purposeful and satisfying*

life. This exercise was completed for each reflection for all participants.

Once the transcripts had been mapped to competencies, patterns and trends were

sought by examining the number of participants who attained learning in each domains

and competencies and which experiences led to learning. Finally, the trends were

compared with the findings in the literature review for commonalities and discrepancies.

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Chapter Four: Results

The CAS (2012) learning and development outcomes provide the framework for presenting and analyzing the results. As noted earlier, CAS identified six broad categories (or domains) in which learning occurs as a result of participating in higher education: knowledge acquisition, construction, integration, and application; cognitive complexity; intrapersonal development; interpersonal competence; humanitarianism and civic engagement; and practical competence. CAS further divides each domain into dimensions. The results were interpreted and recorded at this dimension level as this "allows for a more focused assessment" (CAS, 2012, p. 23). For the purpose of this thesis, the term *competency* will be used in place of *dimension* as this is a more commonly used and understood term.

The following section presents the participants' self-reported competencies that developed as a result of their experiences in student government. In some cases, the competencies were self-reported by the participants through their reflections and experiences. In other cases, I interpreted and correlated the participants' reflections and experiences to competencies. The examples of learning outcomes that are provided by CAS (2012) for each competency guided the correlation of experiences to competencies.

As this study is interested in how participants make meaning of their experiences in student government, their reflections in the form of examples and quotes are included. In order to maintain anonymity, pseudonyms are used for each of the 14 participants. In some cases, participant reflections on a particular experience describe learning in more than one competency. For example, if a participant described the importance of valuing the contributions of others, I recorded this as evidence that they achieved learning in the

competencies *demonstrating professionalism* and *collaboration*, as CAS (2012) considers the latter example to be a learning outcome for both. The competencies are presented in groups according to their learning domains and in order of frequency (i.e., the learning domain with the most competencies achieved by the most participants is presented first).

Practical Competency

Competencies in the domain *practical competency* include: pursuing goals; communicating effectively; technological competence; managing personal affairs; managing career development; demonstrating professionalism; maintaining health and wellness; and living a purposeful and satisfying life. Figure 4.1 illustrates the number of participants (out of a total of 14) who achieved each of these competencies.

Pursuing goals. Examples of CAS (2012) learning outcomes that were self-identified as achieved by the study participants and demonstrated their learning in the competency *pursuing goals* include the ability to: set and pursue individual goals; articulate and make plans to achieve long-term goals and objectives; and identify and work to overcome obstacles that hamper goal achievement. Each of the 14 participants in this study achieved learning in this area. This is not surprising given every participant answered positively to the interview probe "Did you set any goals in your role?" However, outside of this probe, many participants spoke broadly about the importance of setting goals within the context of (a) why they chose to participate in the SA, (b) how they managed and set priorities in their roles and responsibilities, and (c) how their participation in the SA helped them set goals for their futures.
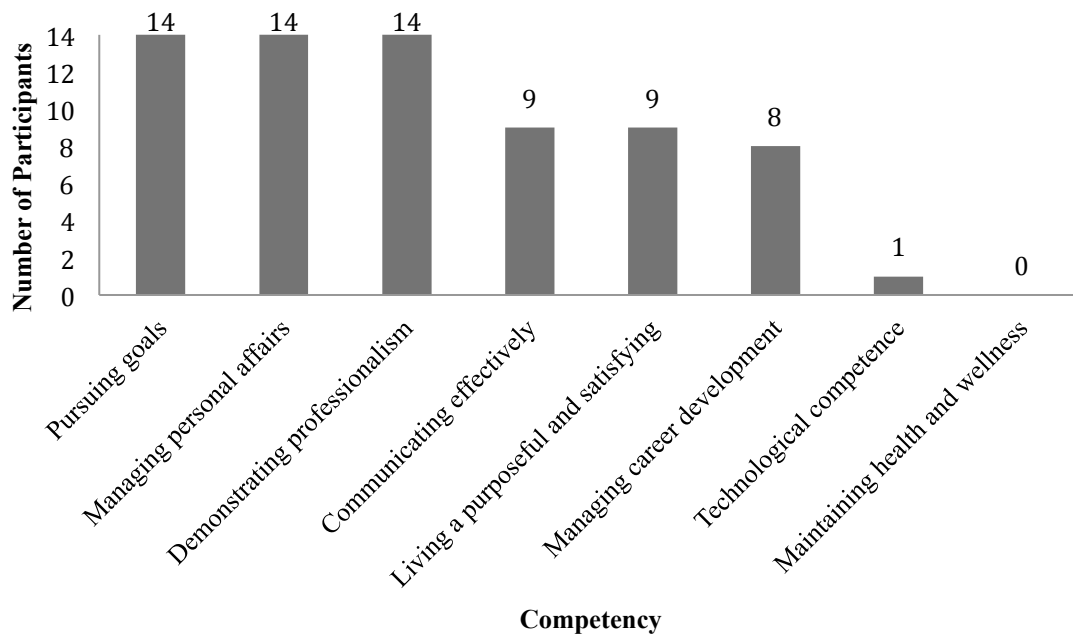
Figure 4.1. Number of participants who achieved learning in each competency of the

domain practical competency.

Participants shared that their involvement in the SA helped them to achieve

personal development goals including becoming more satisfied in their undergraduate

experience. Daniel stated:

> I joined the [SA] to be involved, and I've always been very interested in politics as
> well. I didn't know if that's really what I would experience on student
> government, but I was hoping I'd be able to work with people and enhance my
> communications skills.

For a similar reason Juni stated:

> I hadn't been involved enough in the school. I saw lots of events going on and
> things happening for the student body and I just wanted to take part more. I think
> that people who are involved are more rounded, they stick out from the rest and I
> thought being part of the SA would help me.

Other participants spoke about how setting goals helped them to fulfill their

responsibilities. For example, Mel stated:

> I just think … when you do set goals you really have to be sure to follow through
> with them. I learned that even though this was a volunteer position, when you set
> a goal, you stick with it and you need to follow through.

Participants such as Rosy shared that having goals helped move the group along in its

obligations. She shared:

> So you learn that okay, that one didn't work, we didn't get as far as we wanted to,
> we didn't reach all of our goals. The next time I was in a position like this, I
> would set my standards differently. So, setting goals and achievements helps you
> plan.

Others noted the importance, particularly when trying to resolve conflicts, of establishing

goals as a group. Rayon stated "keeping our sights on our goal of helping students was

important during disagreements."

In considering their future, participants referred to their experience in the SA as

helping them set goals for their personal success. Juni stated "because of the [SA], I am

not afraid to think big in all the things I want to do." Similarly, Daniel shared:

> My experience in the [SA] is going to help me in my career, it's going to help me
> know how to structure my priorities, to meet the most important ones and to meet
> the ones that really really matter. The [SA] has taught me that I need to start
> somewhere.

Managing personal affairs. Examples of CAS (2012) learning outcomes that were

self-identified as achieved by the study participants and demonstrated their learning in the

competency *managing personal affairs* include exhibiting self-reliant behaviours and

managing time effectively. Each of the 14 participants achieved learning in this

competency. Achieving this competency was a result of either developing time

management skills or recognizing that time management was an important skill to develop. In fact, there was no shortage of commentary related to the importance of time management, particularly when it came to planning events. Shane stated "I think just learning how to organize and time manage has been the absolute biggest thing." During her reflections about time management, Sara shared:

> Because I planned [an event] around my school schedule, it forced me to not procrastinate and forced me to basically plan my life a week ahead. If I knew I had an assignment coming and I also knew I had to plan for [an event] I had to organize my time and … social life.

Ruth compared time management as a student and time management as a student leader and implied that time management as a student leader is more challenging. She shared:

> I think time management was a huge thing. I mean you have five classes and sometimes you have a project to do every week for each class. So that can be stressful but time management when you're organizing events and working with volunteers is totally different. You have to manage what's going to go wrong or what is going to go right and go overtime in addition to planning the actual event.

> Eva correlated her success in event planning to her time management skills. She stated:

> I learned that you have to have a set list of things to do and have them timed. This event was very successful because I planned things ahead of time. I had everything written down of what I had to do. Plus I created a critical path that listed all my volunteers and their tasks.

Conversely, Shane attributed some of his self-identified failures to his lack of time management. He shared:

> If I could have been more organized, this could have been done better, that could have gone better. The [SA] taught me that I have to write things down; my tasks that I need to get done and when I need to get it done by.

Demonstrating professionalism. Examples of CAS (2012) learning outcomes that were self-identified as achieved by the study participants and demonstrated their learning in the competency *demonstrating professionalism* include: accepting supervision and direction as needed; valuing the contributions of others; holding oneself accountable for obligations; showing initiative; and assessing, critiquing, and improving the quality of one's work and one's work environment. Again, each of the 14 participants demonstrated that they had developed this competency. All of the participants spoke about being able to accept supervision and direction, as well as valuing the contribution of others (these themes will be discussed extensively in the next learning domain, *interpersonal competence*).

Each of the participants demonstrated that they showed initiative and/or held themselves accountable for fulfilling their roles and responsibilities. The majority of examples seemed to correspond to the themes of demonstrating initiative and fulfilling responsibilities through planning and implementing events. Other examples provided involved advocating for students, and/or advancing the organization. For example, Rayon stated: "I wanted to stick to my words when I was campaigning. I just wanted to do something for the … students, because I did not want to be remembered as a liar."

Mel related the importance of being passionate or interested in a task in order to fulfill it. She stated:

> The [SA] has showed me that if there is not something that sparks my interest—
> that if I am not passionate about it—then there is no way that I would give it my
> full effort. It's not fair to an organization or to a corporation for me to not to be
> passionate with what I am doing, just being there for a paycheque.

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Further, Mel reflected about feeling obligated to complete her term despite having a negative experience. She shared:

> It was a really big test to … be accepting, to be understanding, to be patient, to understand that there is a bigger picture above me, perhaps I wasn't happy in my position, but at the end of the day, I had a role to fill and that was important to me. Because especially as a senior student, it's a really bad example … that when things get hard, you give up, that's not something that I've ever lived by.

Lastly, other participants remarked on the importance of self-assessment and feedback as a mechanism for improving work. Rosy shared: "I find negative feedback was really good because it motivated you to do something better."

Communicating effectively. Examples of CAS (2012) learning outcomes that were self-identified as achieved by the study participants and demonstrated their learning in the competency *communicating effectively* include: conveying meaning in a way that others understand by writing and speaking coherently and effectively; influencing others through writing or speaking; and listening attentively to others and responding appropriately. Nine of the 14 participants demonstrated that they learned this competency. For many, gaining the confidence and the ability to communicate, both in writing and in person, was one of the most significant learning experiences in student government. For example, Juni shared that "the most important thing I learned was to gain confidence while speaking with strangers or with people who have higher authority than me."

Other participants remarked that their role in the SA provided them with the opportunity to improve their communication skills. Ruby spoke about the opportunity that working in the SA gave her to refine her communication skills, something she felt she was not able to do in her science-based program. She stated: "The position has given me

the opportunity to refine my writing skills. In my program we don't get the chance to write essays. Public speaking has been huge for me."

Others remarked that their role in the SA facilitated not only an improvement of their communication skills, but also their confidence in communicating with others and their ability to adapt their style according to the audience (e.g., student, staff, faculty, or vendor). Daniel shared:

> Prior to starting in the [SA], I wasn't very comfortable talking to everybody and talking in professional situations and even in groups; I didn't like it. As part of the [SA], talking in meetings, talking to professors and administrators, all sorts of people, has been really, really helpful. This helped solidify and enhance my communication skills so much more.

Similarly, Juni shared:

> I definitely learned how to communicate in various ways like informally or formally. I did grow professionally in terms of how to talk to people in a higher authority than me as well as talking to everyone in my council. It was like a big range and even when writing emails, it had to be done professionally.

Other participants spoke about the role that communication played in facilitating the group process and its success. Nik spoke about communication and its role within conflict resolution; he shared: "Looking back, if we did a better job [of communicating] we could have avoided a lot of problems." This particular reflection provides an illuminating example of Kolb's philosophical model. In this example, one could conceive that Nik demonstrated the *reflective observation* phase when he made personal sense of the causes of his interpersonal conflicts in the SA. When he hypothesized that some of the group's conflicts might have been reduced through stronger communications, Nik demonstrated *abstract conceptualization*.

Ruth spoke about her refined ability to communicate her thoughts and ideas to the team and in some cases persuading others to help the group make a good decision with the interests of their constituents in mind. She stated:

> I think my most significant experience, is being able to voice my opinions at the meetings and being able to persuade others. I am a voice of the students. At the meetings … if a motion either passes or it doesn't pass is dependent on us. It could make a big difference. Like it could be a big amount of money that would really affect students. I feel like being able to persuade those that are at the table and being able to persuade a certain motion, to either go the way I want it to go or to not go. I think that was a significant experience because I know I'm really helping the student body by persuading others. I am able to communicate my thoughts more. I guess that is a big thing, I didn't know how to do it before, like I said, I wasn't able to talk to people before, I kept most of my feelings inside. Now I kind of channeled a lot of my thoughts and made this a passion of mine, just working on the [SA], having an opinion, voicing other students' opinions. That I think has made me a better person. It's made me a persuader, it's made me an arguer and I wasn't like that before.

Living a purposeful and satisfying life. Examples of CAS (2012) learning outcomes that were self-identified as achieved by the study participants and demonstrated their learning in the competency *living a purposeful and satisfying life* include: making purposeful decisions regarding balance among education, work, and leisure time, and acts in confluence with personal identity and ethical, spiritual, and moral values. Nine of the 14 participants demonstrated that they had achieved learning in this competency. Participants not only recognized that balance between multiple commitments is important, but also the importance of establishing a personal philosophy in relation to balance and actually achieving it. Sara shared:

> I never let something become more important than something else. I also never took advantage [of my commitments] like I never said that, "oh I am on the [SA] and I have to do this so my social life can wait." Everything stayed important and in perspective.

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Similarly, Juni shared:

> I was able to like get things done. Even though there was always pressure from the [SA] to do this and that and then there was school with a ton of homework. So learning to balance was important, and once you get that balance, you're good to go.

In another example, Mel established a personal philosophy around finding balance through prioritizing when she was challenged in meeting all of her commitments. She shared:

> One of the biggest challenges was to multi-task and prioritize, because on one hand, when you run for a position, you are obligated to fulfill your role, but on the other hand, I came to university to be a student and to achieve an education, and so it's a really hard balance between fulfilling the obligations that you yourself volunteered for, in addition to sort of fulfilling your student obligations. Prioritizing was key, realizing that you are only one person, you can only be in one place at a time, I was sort of the yes person for a lot of years of my life, and last year I sort of realized, well, there's sometimes you just have to say no. And that was a real big growing experience, not just as a student leader, but as a person, it was sort of a really big realization that you can only do as much as you can do. And it doesn't mean putting in less effort; it's just meaning prioritizing where your effort needs to go, that's all.

For other participants, belonging to the SA gave them purpose and contributed to their satisfaction. Kris stated: "I learned if you start getting more involved, you have a lot more fun and you get so much more out of it." Nik, who was struggling with significant personal issues, stated:

> [Participating in the SA] helped me personally last year … it gave me a reason to continue, to wake up in the morning and to go on. School itself wasn't enough to motivate me, and it was difficult, life was pretty difficult and then when I started the position it helped me feel better, it helped me get up in the morning, it helped me accomplish something, and I think that's really what it was, the feeling of accomplishing something, regardless of what it was.

Managing career development. The CAS (2012) learning outcome that was self-identified as achieved by study participants and demonstrated their learning in the

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competency *managing career development* was the ability to recognize the importance of transferable skills. Just over half of the participants (i.e., eight of the 14) achieved this competency by finding relevancy in their experiences in the SA to their future careers. Of the eight participants who demonstrated learning in this area, all spoke of transferable skills; that is, the participants' involvement in the SA helped them to develop skills that either will assist or already have assisted them in the world of work and in developing their career. In fact, many of them saw the experience as career preparation. Daniel, who at the time was completing an internship in a financial institution, shared:

> I learned how to interact within a professional setting and in an organization that is a lot similar to the real work that I see [at the bank] right now. I think [my experience in the SA] really benefited me. It was one of the stepping-stones for me to learn how to behave in a professional setting. I feel that what I learned in the [SA] is helping me to succeed at my internship.

Similarly, Rayon stated:

> My time management and project management skills, I think, are developed a little more. I now know the thought process of how I would approach a project. Just being able to handle big projects is going to help me with my next job. [My managers] are going to give me a broad goal and I will have to come up with the deliverables they want and give them what they want.

Looking ahead to potential future interviews, Rayon also stated:

> [My SA] experience is something I am really proud of. Even in my interviews this is what I will talk about. This will be one of the big things I refer to when asked: "tell me about the time, you showed a little initiative."

Technological competence. Examples of CAS (2012) learning outcomes that were self-identified as achieved by one study participant and demonstrated his learning in the competency *technological competence* include: demonstrating technological literacy and skills; and using technology ethically and effectively to communicate, solve

problems, and complete tasks. The participant who developed this competency achieved it through building websites and programs to run the operations of the SA more effectively. As this task was specific to the participant's role on the SA, it is not surprising that only one participant developed this competency.

Interpersonal Competency

Interpersonal competency broadly refers to working and building relationships with others (CAS, 2012). It includes the specific competencies: meaningful relationships; interdependence; collaboration; and effective leadership. As demonstrated in Figure 4.2, the majority of participants achieved learning in each of these competencies, signaling that working with others was a rich learning experience.
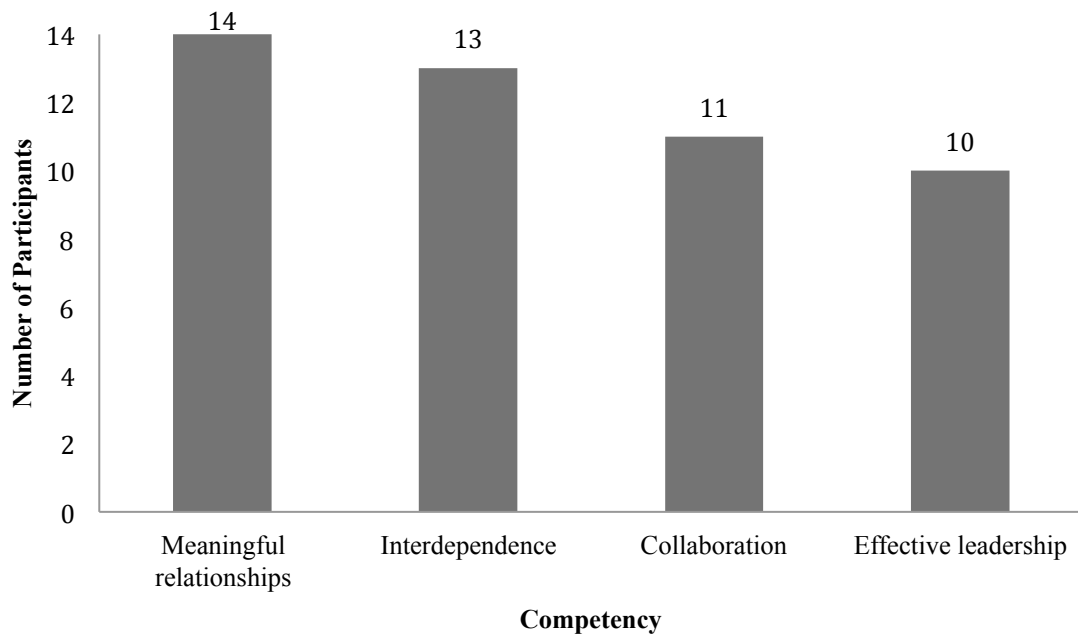

Figure 4.2. Number of participants who achieved learning in each competency of the learning domain interpersonal competence.

Meaningful relationships. The CAS (2012) learning outcomes that were self-

identified as achieved by study participants and demonstrated their learning in the

competency *meaningful relationships* include the ability to: establish healthy, mutually

beneficial relationships with others; treat others with respect; manage interpersonal

conflicts effectively; and demonstrate appropriately assertive behaviour. Learning in this

competency was significant; each of the 14 participants self-identified learning here.

Working with others and navigating through the ebbs and flows of relationships,

particularly conflicts, was a significant learning experience for each participant. The

importance of developing and maintaining relationships, recognizing and validating

differences while working together, and navigating conflicts were common themes.

Rayon shared:

> Establishing, building and maintaining relationships are important. Conflict is
> really good in a group as well, because you kind of get the best ideas out when it
> comes [conflict arises]…that is important, but also is maintaining the relationship
> at the same time. There are so many different personalities and it is somehow
> harder to work with others. Some people will want everything done their own way
> and I find that those people take longer to work with as opposed to people who
> take the "go with the flow" approach. So you have to be willing to tweak your
> approach a little bit.

Many participants spoke generally about the importance of working with others and value

that this brought to the overall experience. Anya stated, "building relationships made the

experience a lot better." Similarly, Mel stated: "I made great friendships in the [SA] with

people who had the same philosophy as me. When we wanted to go down the same road,

we really melded well, had a goal, and we went for it." Saif reported that he learned how

to develop relationships because of his experiences in the SA. Prior to his role in the SA,

developing relationships was something he was uncomfortable with. He stated: "I feel

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like I'm a lot more open. I can make friends a lot more easily; I can get along with just

about anyone now. I can start conversations with random people all the time too." Many

students spoke about the value of building relationships outside of the SA. Juni shared:

"Building relationships were the most significant experience, all kinds of relationships,

from faculty to staff and your president and co-rep. It was like four different types of

relationships. I found that working with others motivated me."

Every participant shared at least one example of a conflict that arose. Most of the

participants also offered critiques of how they personally handled conflict, thereby

solidifying the learning in this dimension. Nik shared:

> Even in conflicts, you can try to look at it from the other person's point of view
> and then… you can use that to find consensus. So, learning that you don't always
> have to fight, it's not always a battle, you can have professional discussions and
> just work things out, it's much easier usually, and approaching it in that manner is
> easier and works more beneficially than approaching it as "this is my position,
> let's fight now." So, I think that's probably the thing that came out, knowing how
> to approach a situation. I learned that out of all of the difficulties, keeping
> personal and professional issues separated is the most important. Avoiding
> personal attacks is also important. I wish I had tried to deflate the personal conflict
> earlier on and not let it fester.

Sara shared that one of the biggest skills that she learned was appreciating different

perspectives. She said:

> I tried to not let other people's biases affect my own beliefs, which is a very hard
> thing to do but was one of my biggest challenges. Probably the biggest skill that I
> learned was breaking down the situation, looking at different perspectives ... if
> you are able to see a conflict from someone else's perspective you are more likely
> to resolve it.

Ruth learned about how her actions and words impact others during conflicts. She shared:

> I think I would think about some things I say before I say them. I think sometimes
> I'm trying to just get out my point of view but I kind of hurt people along the way,
> people feel that I attack them personally. Sometimes when I get home and I think

about what I said I'm like, "Why did I say that? I should have thought about that before I said it." I think also just kind of letting people stand up for themselves, I kind of just tend to over talk for people instead of letting them talk for themselves. So I think I just need to just think about what I'm going to say before I say it and just kind of listen to others, give others a chance to speak and let them get their opinions out because my opinion is not always the right one.

Interdependence. The CAS (2012) learning outcomes that were self-identified as achieved by study participants and demonstrated their learning in the competency *interdependence* include the ability to: seek help from and offer help to others when needed; share a group or organizational goal and work with others to achieve it; and learn from the contributions and involvement of others. All but one participant demonstrated learning in this dimension, marking its significance.

When examining the experiences of the participants across this competency, three major themes emerged: (a) the importance that the participants placed on working with others; (b) the ability of the participants to recognize and rely on the experience and expertise of others; and (c) the value that the participants placed in helping others. In recognizing the importance of working with others, Ruth shared:

> I realize that when you put more heads together there is [*sic*] a lot more ideas that come out. I've learned to listen to other people's ideas and consider them as well. So in that way, I like working with others because you can put more ideas on the table. Also, I learned that I couldn't really do it all by myself. By delegating, that it let me count on others and also helped things run very smoothly.

Similarly, Anya stated: "Collectively as a group we can work through anything, but if we stand on our own, we're not going to get through anything." In reflecting on what he learned from others and their experience, Nik shared:

> Learning from other people and methods that work, we were lucky enough that we had [more experienced] people around us that we could rely on and I learned that I could really rely on their knowledge and years' experience a lot more.

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Mel also discussed using others as resources. She stated:

> Definitely networking was important. Things are a lot easier when you know people, so just finding contacts and where to go, who to talk to and you sort of learn the system of the school, if you want to do this, this is where you have to go, this is what you have to fill out and this is who you need to speak to, so that's really important.

Ruby also saw the value in working with others. She shared: "One of the problems I had last year was I didn't use my resources in a way that most benefited me. So just using the people around you is important."

> Other participants highlighted the importance of helping others. Shane shared:

> I don't like sitting back and not doing anything, I offered to help. I know one of the program reps was struggling. So I was like, I'll sit down and I'll help you work this out, together we'll see what we can do.

Similarly, Kris stated:

> I helped with a few other events. Other representatives needed help, so I would help with a few of their events. I would say that I definitely helped out more than I thought I would have had to. Everybody was supposed to … stay for two hours, there were numerous events where I would do six hours because not everybody would show up. I mean that's not really going out of your way because I was on the [SA] so it was my responsibility to be there and help out.

> **Collaboration.** The CAS (2012) learning outcomes that were self-identified as achieved by study participants and demonstrated their learning in the competency *collaboration* include the ability to: work co-operatively with others, including people different from self and/or with different points of view; seek and value the involvement of others; and listen to and consider others' points of view. The majority of participants (i.e., 11 of the 14) demonstrated through their reflections that they were competent in collaboration. This was particularly true for those who worked alongside a program co-

representative. Shane, a program co-representative, talked about need to overcome tensions

with his co-representative in order to progress:

> It got really stressful. We seemed to get really stressed with each other just because we were always competing. I found it helped to step back, put yourself in their shoes, this is what she sees, here's the pros and cons, and then let's go from there.

Kris found that differences with her co-representative were an asset. She explained:

> I think there were qualities that [my co-rep] didn't have that I did and vice versa. So we would help each other out. We could seesaw in a way, I guess, and that we really did lean on each other and you need that. If you're going to work with someone … you really need to be able to count on each other and be able to lean on them.

Upon reflection, Ruby learned that conflict with her co-representative impacted her

success. She stated: "Well, I didn't get along with someone last year that I had to work

with really really closely with and I think that overall it hurt what I could have done."

Many participants reflected on important skills and attributes necessary to work

with others. Many indicated that flexibility and adaptability were two such attributes. Sara

shared: "One of the most important things when working with others is being flexible.

Things change constantly and just knowing how to still go with it is important. It's not 'I,'

'I,' 'I'; it's 'us,' 'us,' 'us'." Similarly Nik stated:

> So you have to adapt and you have to work with everybody, because you can't choose your co-workers. So adapting and being open to all ideas and all ways of doing things because you can't have it your way, you can't have it their way you have to have something that works for the group.

Most co-representatives shared that despite the challenges of working with others,

working with an entire team was a significant learning experience. A strategy that Kris

learned while in the SA was to carefully choose who to work with based on experience

and observation.

She shared:

> Working with a group as a whole was totally different. I mean I didn't know any of those people until I stepped in there. So, I think working with that group you just sort of learn, you learn quickly, who you can and cannot count on to be able to do things very quickly which is a good skill to have, I think to be able to realize what people you can and cannot count on. So, yeah just being able to read people, after one event you can kind of see who's going to do what and for the next year and you know who you can count on or if you come to us and ask for help and I like that even though some people do say they'll help you out, they don't always follow through with that.

Effective leadership. The CAS (2012) learning outcomes that were self-identified as achieved by study participants and demonstrated their learning in the competency *effective leadership* include the ability to: demonstrate skill in guiding and assisting a group, organization, or community in meeting its goals; identify and understand the dynamic of a group; exhibit democratic principles as a leader or group member; and communicate a vision, mission, or purpose that encourages commitment and action in others. All but four participants achieved learning in this competency.

Experiences in the SA facilitated leadership skill development and provided the space for the participants to make their own meaning of leadership. Sara, who created a program committee as a means to plan and execute events, stated:

> The committee taught me how to be a better leader. I've learned that being a leader is not necessarily about leading people, it's being there as a support for individuals when they need it. It's about giving people choices and allowing them to go with it however they want because I might have an idea of how I want something to look and how I want it to be done and everything like that, but a good leader allows their team to carry it because it's a team initiative. It's never just about one person.

Overwhelmingly, participants shared numerous experiences around group dynamics and their role in moving the association forward. Surprisingly, none of the participants attributed this to having leadership skills. Nik clearly demonstrates his

leadership skills in the following reflection but does not identify it as such. He shared:

> You still have to work with people; you have to do your best to grow the organization. You need to take advantage of all people skills. Sometimes they start out not wanting to do very much, but then in the end they're very very involved, so trying to get people to see the difference they can make is important.

Similarly, Shane shared:

> [My experience in the SA] also kind of brought out that I'm there to help, I'm not here just to participate but I'm also willing to help see something get better and better. It's not about one person taking charge and not following. It's more of … a group, like you lead, you follow, you lead, you follow, at the same time instead of opposed to just leading and not following. It's just really about everyone has got to listen to everyone's point of view. They can't disregard one thing because it's not what you want to hear. You have to consider all points of view when making a final decision on something.

Some of the participants, who had previous leadership roles, recognized the importance of being able to step back from the position of leader in order to move a group forward but again, they did not connect this concept to leadership. Eva shares:

> It was just a really big learning experience realizing that you can't always have a leadership role like I'm used to. I'm not used to sitting back and having this is what we're doing, this is how we're doing it and this is what you're going to do.

It is worth noting that many participants placed significant value and learning around participating in SA meetings. Many expressed the importance of a productive and organized meeting as a vehicle to advance the group and their collective goals. Nik shared:

> It's hard when you have so many people with so many different opinions to make sure that the meeting is productive and that everybody is still getting their say in. It is important to structure the meetings with an agenda with time limits.

Similarly, Eva shared:

> So before you go into any meeting so that you're not blundering along, know what it is that you want to say and what you want from people. Like if you need help with something, know how to ask for it at the meeting.

Rayon added:

> In the future, if I have to run a meeting then I kind of have a good sense of maybe how to keep a structure and maybe always having an agenda. In a meeting, all of your arguments have to be logical like whatever you are trying to get to happen has to be very logical and has to be in line with the goals of the [SA] and act in the best interest of everyone.

Cognitive Complexity

Cognitive complexity includes the competencies: critical thinking; reflective thinking; effective reasoning; and creativity. Figure 4.3 illustrates the number of participants (out of a total of 14) who self-identified learning in each of these competencies. All of the participants achieved learning in *critical thinking* and *reflective thinking*; however, there are two significant caveats: (a) there was a high degree of overlap that resulted in these competencies being reported together and (b) the 14 participants demonstrated learning in these competencies as a result of the interviewer's assessment and interpretation of the interview conversation, and not necessarily as a result of how the participants made meaning of their experiences. Finally, seven participants self-reported learning in the competency *creativity*.
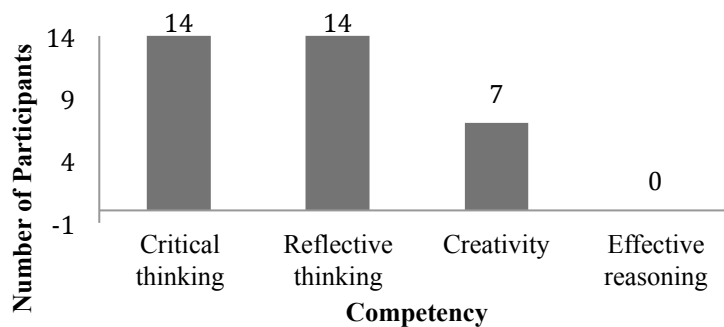

Figure 4.3. Number of participants who achieved learning in each competency of the domain cognitive complexity.

Critical thinking and reflective thinking. As previously mentioned, the competencies *critical thinking* and *reflective thinking* were not reported as separate for this study, therefore they are presented here together. The CAS (2012) learning outcome that was common in both competencies and demonstrated their learning involved the ability to assess assumptions and consider alternative perspectives and solutions (i.e., rethinking previous assumptions).

The interview itself seemed to provide a vehicle for each of the 14 participants to rethink previous assumptions and consider alternative solutions. Each participant gave alternative examples of how he or she would approach things differently if given the opportunity. The majority of examples corresponded to experiences of time management, working with others, and the importance of being open to new ideas and perspectives. The participants framed these experiences through the lens of the two previous learning domains (*interpersonal competence* and *practical competence*) rather than through cognitive complexity. However, the participants demonstrated their skill in critical and reflective thinking during the interview process, skills that were quite possibly developed or refined through their experiences in the SA. One of the interesting findings of this research is marked here. The interview process—the participant's preparation for the interview and the interview itself—seemed to facilitate learning. When considering the participants' participation in and contributions to the interview through the lens of Kolb's learning model, they clearly demonstrate movement through two phases of Kolb's Cycle of Experiential Learning: (a) the *reflective observation* phase during which time the learner begins to make personal sense of the experience; and (b) the *abstract conceptualization* phase when the learner creates sound hypotheses, implications, and/or

strategies for actions. These phases were demonstrated by the 14 participants when they showed their ability to think and rethink previous assumptions and consider alternative solutions when considering how they would approach their role in the SA again if given the opportunity.

Six participants spoke specifically about developing critical thinking skills as a result of participating in student government. They described critical thinking as problem solving through the ability to look at things from other perspectives and the ability to analyze and consider alternative solutions. For example, Nik stated: "Critical thinking is important and you always have to look at everything in different ways … get out of your shoes and try to look at it from other perspectives."

Creativity. The CAS (2012) learning outcome that was self-identified as achieved by study participants and demonstrated their learning in the competency *creativity* centered on the ability to formulate a new approach to a particular problem. Examples of creativity cited by the participants included developing new approaches to traditional events, marketing and promoting activities, and finding unique ways to raise funds.

Intrapersonal Development

Intrapersonal development includes the competencies: realistic self-appraisal, self-understanding, and self-respect; commitment to ethics and integrity; identity development; and spiritual awareness (CAS, 2012). Figure 4.4 illustrates the number of participants (out of a total of 14) who achieved learning in each competency. Eleven participants achieved learning in the competency *realistic self-appraisal, self -*

understanding, and self-respect, nine in the competency *commitment to ethics and integrity*, and two in the competency *identity development*.
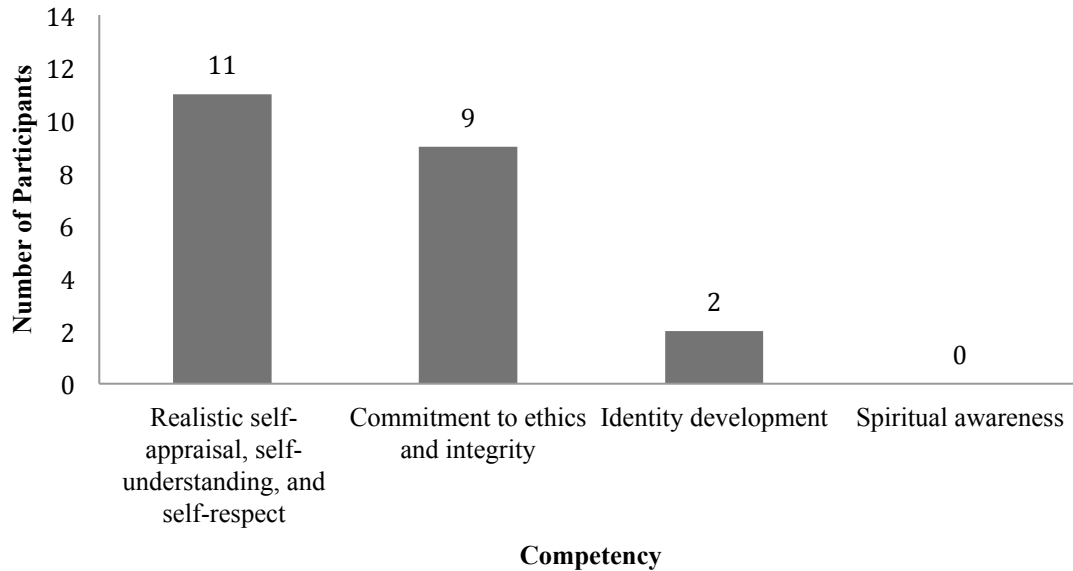
Figure 4.4. Number of participants who achieved learning in each competency of the domain intrapersonal development.

Realistic self-appraisal, self-understanding, and self-respect. The CAS (2012) learning outcome that was self-identified as achieved by study participants and demonstrated their learning in the competency *realistic self-appraisal, self-understanding, and self-respect* include the ability to: assess, articulate, and acknowledge personal skills, abilities, and growth areas; use self-knowledge to make decisions; articulate rationale for personal behaviour; seek and consider feedback from others; employ self-reflection to gain insight; and balance the needs of self with needs of others. Eleven participants demonstrated learning in this competency.

In all 11 instances, experiences working with others provided a rich source of self-reflection that ultimately led to a greater understanding for the participants' own self. Kris shared:

> What I think I've come away with from being in the [SA] is learning more about myself and how I work with others. Working with people in a classroom is one thing. Working with volunteers on a student council, helping to better the community of the university and having to organize activities, I think that's totally different.

Anya shared:

> I'm a little hot-headed so I think I would kind of cooled down a bit; be a little bit more patient, a little bit more understanding; not kind of be like, "okay it's going to be my way." I think I'm a stronger person. I think I'm a very strong person. I am able to take a lot of criticism and not take it to heart. I can take that criticism in to make myself a better person.

Not all outcomes where positive. For Ruth, her negative experience working with others reinforced her view that she is unable to work with others. She shared:

> So, I'm not good at working with others. I think it's because I'm very much a perfectionist and I like everything to be done the way that I want it done. Sometimes I feel like it's better to do certain things alone so that you know that it will be done right. I found this year that you can avoid errors by not delegating. I don't want anyone commenting and saying what I have done is wrong. I hate taking criticism, I hate when things go wrong, I take it personally.

Learning this competency was not limited to experiences working with others. In many cases, learning was demonstrated while reflecting on their student government experience as a whole. Many reflected on how they had changed and benefited as a result of being part of the SA, as expressed in the following quote by Ruth:

> Before, I used to kind of get angry when things didn't go perfectly. I would get negative about things. Now, I am more optimistic. If we don't have [something that we need] let's just work with what we have and make it really good.

Commitment to ethics and integrity. The CAS (2012) learning outcomes that

was self-identified as achieved by study participants and demonstrated their learning in

the competency *commitment to ethics and integrity* includes the ability to: incorporate

ethical reasoning into action; explore and articulate the values and principles involved in

personal decision making; act in congruence with personal values and beliefs; exemplify

dependability, honesty, and trustworthiness; and accept personal accountability.

Examples of this learning outcome were uncovered across various experiences in

the SA. For some, actions and decisions were grounded in personal values and principles.

For example, Eva shared a story of an action that she took despite being told by

University administrators that she should not do so. She said: "something that I took from

[that experience] is sometimes it is easier to ask for forgiveness than permission and if

you believe in something just keep going."

In addition, numerous participants remarked about personal accountability to their

constituents, because they were elected for the position. Rosy shared "I have a

responsibility to the students. They elected me to this position. I really wanted this

position and they trusted me with their student fees and with their year."

Further, others found their personal accountability to their constituents kept them

grounded during interpersonal conflicts. Mel shares:

> [Speaking up] depended on how strongly I felt about the decision at hand, if it was
> something that was sort of trivial, it doesn't really matter. But if it was something
> that I cared about, I voiced my opinion. I found a lot of things (like doctoring
> minutes) were unethical and I had a big problem with this. That's a big thing and
> sometimes it causes a lot of conflict, but I am not the type of person where I can
> look back and say I wish I would have stood up for what I believed in, and for, I
> don't know why, but it's just my morals are just really important to me, I will
> never… say that another person's morals are not correct in comparison to my own
> but I have to always voice my opinion.

Similarly, Ruby shared:

> Personally … leadership matters, it really, really does not matter where you are as a student or just like in the business world. If you choose to speak your mind and be honest about certain things, like I could have got into that and been like, okay well I'm just going to go and listen, right. I don't want to step on anyone's toes telling them, "well I hated this program it was a waste of time," but if you don't do that and you know your students don't like it either, that's not helping anyone. In fact, people are going to lose respect and trust in you. So it was just really, really important in realizing that sometimes you have to speak your mind whether you think people are going to want to hear it or that they aren't. And when something is so close to someone's heart, like this is someone's baby, you don't insult [them], especially when I have to work with [them] for the next 4 years.

Identity development. The CAS (2012) learning outcomes that were self-identified as achieved by study participants and demonstrated their learning in the competency *identity development* include the ability to: integrate multiple aspects of identity into a coherent whole; and commit to important aspects of self. Only two participants self-reported learning in this area. Both participants articulated value and meaning in their multiple identities and that these identities informed their decisions and actions. Identities articulated by both participants included those related to being a student, belonging to the SA, their employment, and their personal relationships. In addition, one integrated her age and resulting beliefs and values into her identity and the other integrated her religious views.

Humanitarianism and Civic Engagement

Humanitarianism and civic engagement includes the competencies: understanding and appreciation of cultural and human differences; social responsibility; global perspective; and sense of civic responsibility. Figure 4.5 illustrates the number of participants (out of a total of 14) who achieved learning in each competency. With the

exception of *sense of civic responsibility*, most participants did not achieve learning in this domain.
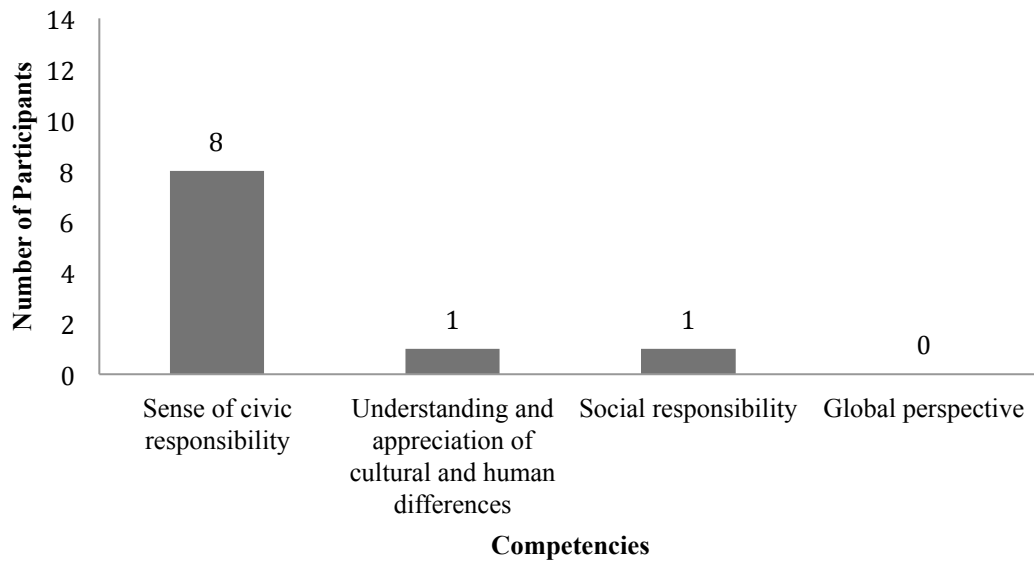
Figure 4.5. Number of participants who achieved learning in each competency of the domain humanitarianism and civic engagement.

Sense of civic responsibility. The CAS (2012) learning outcomes that were self-identified as achieved by study participants and demonstrated their learning in the competency *sense of civic responsibility* include the ability to: demonstrate consideration for the welfare of others in decision making; engage in critical reflection and principled dissent; understand and participate in relevant governance systems; and educate and facilitate the civic engagement of others. Just over half of the participants (i.e., eight) achieved learning in this area. The majority of learning in this area related to the role that

they were playing in student government. Given this, it is somewhat surprising that not all

participants articulated learning here. Nik reflected on the role that the SA played in the

institution. He stated:

> In the majority of cases, we were able to show the students and the administration
> and our parent institutions that we are a student government, we're professionals,
> trying to do this job for the students and we're somebody to be taken seriously. So
> when we have an opinion, we are the opinion of the 3,000 students that we
> represent.

Juni shared how belonging to the SA allowed her to be the voice of students. She said:

> I learned that students actually have a lot of voice. I don't think if we feel a certain
> way about something not to bring it forward. So I learned that I can be a voice for
> students and help them. If they want me to bring an issue forward, then it feels
> good to me to be able to bring it to someone.

Similarly Rosy shared: "I have a responsibility to the students. They elected me to this

position. "I really wanted this position and they trusted me with their student fees."

Finally, Anya incorporated the students' voice in the decisions she made in the SA. She

shared: "It was really important to make our students part of the decision-making process.

All the ideas came from students. I made sure that the stuff that went on was the stuff that

students wanted to see."

Understanding and appreciation of cultural and human differences. Only one

participant demonstrated that she achieved learning in the competency *understanding and*

appreciation of cultural and human differences. The CAS (2012) learning outcome self-

identified as achieved by this individual was the ability to understand one's own identity

and culture. This competency surfaced when Sara reflected and critiqued her decision to

proceed with an event despite feeling her own religion was being excluded.

Social responsibility. Only one participant demonstrated that she achieved

learning in the domain *social responsibility.* The CAS (2012) learning outcome self-

identified as achieved by this individual was the ability to appropriately challenge the

unfair, unjust, or uncivil behaviour of other individuals or groups. Juni, the single

participant who demonstrated this competency, shared a transformational experience of

fully embracing her role in advocating for the needs of students in their program. Juni

shared that "Because of my experiences in the [SA], I feel I now have a moral

responsibility to advocate for others who can't for themselves."

Knowledge Acquisition, Construction, Integration, and Application

The domain *knowledge acquisition, construction, integration, and application*

includes the competencies: relating knowledge to daily life; understanding knowledge from

a range of disciplines; connecting knowledge to other knowledge, ideas, and experiences;

and constructing knowledge. Figure 4.6 illustrates the number of participants (out of a total

of 14) who achieved learning in each of these competencies. When one considers that this

domain closely relates to classroom learning (Kuh, 1995) it is not surprising that the

participants did not achieve learning across the four competencies. In fact, learning was

achieved by seven participants in only one competency: *relating knowledge to daily life*.

Relating knowledge to daily life. The CAS (2012) learning outcomes that were

self-identified as achieved by study participants and demonstrated their learning in the

competency *relating knowledge to daily life* include the ability to: make connections

between classroom and out-of classroom learning; and articulate career choices based on

assessment of interests, values, skills, and abilities. Seven participants achieved learning

in this competency by relating their classroom learning to experiences in the SA and/or connecting their experiences in the SA to future paths or career choices.
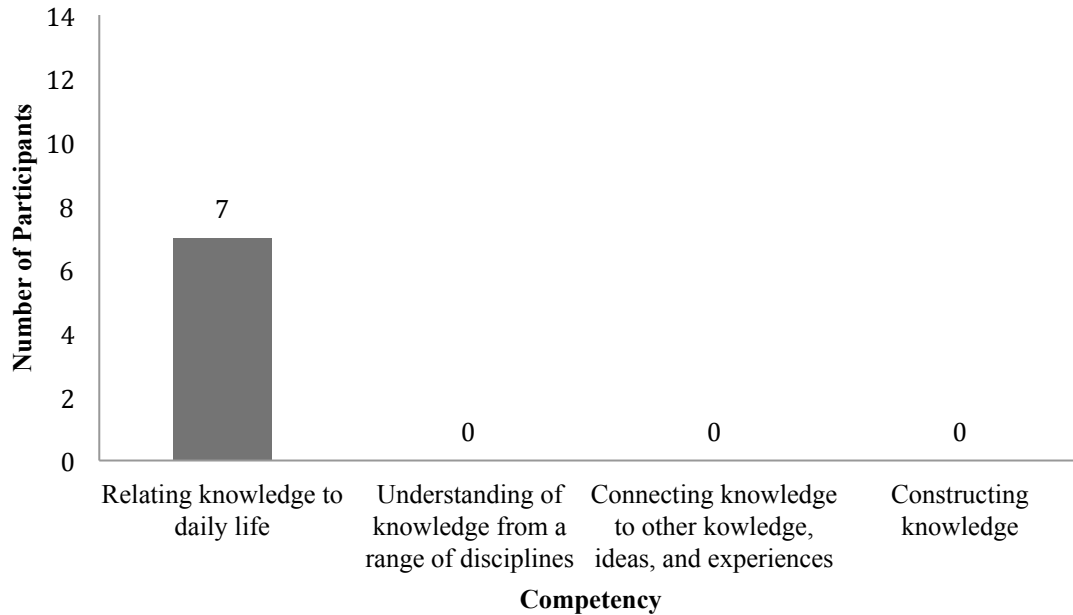
Figure 4.6. Number of participants who achieved learning in each competency of the domain knowledge acquisition, construction, integration, and application.

Most of the seven participants highlighted how they incorporated classroom learning into their role in the SA. For example, the students in the business program related business principles such as marketing to their role in the SA. Those in a communication-type program highlighted communication strategies and the importance of communication to their role in the SA. Finally, those in the criminal justice program highlighted the importance of process in the organization as well as advocacy for others. Further, some participants articulated clearly the connection between what they were learning in the classroom to their experiences in the SA.

Nik compared his experience in the SA to an internship:

> The [SA] allowed me to take what I learned in the classroom, and implement [it] in a setting. So it helped in so many ways to help me practice some of the skills I already had such as web design and things like that.

Rayon spoke about how he used a concept learned in class as a strategy in planning events for his constituents. Rayon stated: "In classes I learned that it was good business in general to know what your customers and stakeholders want. In the [SA], our stakeholders was (sic) the student body." Others compared the quality of learning experience both inside and outside the classroom. Daniel shared that through planning events in the SA, he developed "thinking" skills not learned in the classroom:

> If the [SA] wasn't there, I wouldn't be thinking in the way that I do. I wouldn't have any events to organize. I think and I believe unless you do something, you won't be able to think that way. When you have to do something you are forced to think and come up with strategies and ideas and that you wouldn't learn in a classroom setting. … It was sort of similar to a big project that we did in school. The only difference was we didn't have to write a 20-page report. While it was similar, there was a lot more pressure and I think sometimes the pressure brought out good things.

Another aspect of this competency relates to connecting experiences to career choices. Many participants clearly connected their values and skills, many of which were honed through their experiences in the SA, to career choices. Ruth spoke about her experiences generally and where they will take her in the future:

> I know that I find most meaning in my life … when I'm doing something not for creating a profit or for helping myself, but to help others. So this experience within the [SA] has taught me that … maybe that I might go into politics. I've been able to see how changes are made and how beneficial being in a position where you can make changes can be.

Chapter Five: Analysis and Discussion of the Results

The first research question asked, does learning happen through experiences in student government? According to the students in this study, the answer is an unequivocal yes. In addition to answering this question, this study also uncovered two other research questions, namely what students self-reported as learned and what experiences led to learning. Table G.1 in Appendix G provides the framework for this chapter's discussion and analysis of the findings. The table provides a summary of the complete findings of this study. It indicates the competencies and by extension the domains in which learning happened, and it also summarizes what types of experiences led to learning.

Learning According to Learning Domain

The second research question asked about what students learned as a result of participating in student government. The CAS provided the framework to identify the learning. As noted in previous chapters, the CAS identified six broad categories (or domains) where learning occurs: knowledge acquisition, construction, integration, and application; cognitive complexity; intrapersonal development; interpersonal competence; humanitarianism and civic engagement; and practical competence. The domains are further divided into competencies. For example, the domain *cognitive complexity* is divided into four competencies: critical thinking; reflective thinking, effective reasoning; and creativity. Figure 5.1 illustrates the distribution of where learning occurred according to the broader category (i.e., learning domain).

Pie chart legend:
- Practical competence — 36%
- Interpersonal comptence — 25%
- Cognitive complexity — 18%
- Intrapersonal development — 12%
- Humanitarianism and civic engagement — 5%
- Knowledge, acquisition, construction, integration & application — 4%
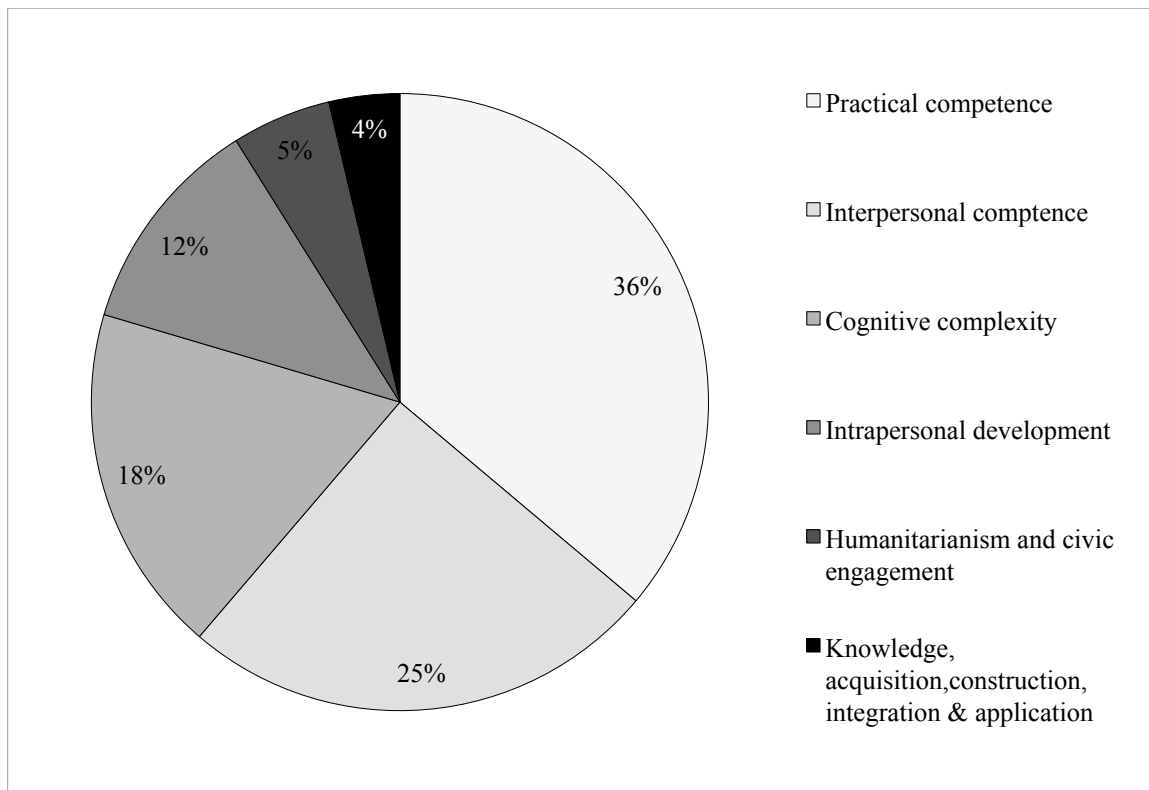
Figure 5.1. Distribution of learning according to CAS learning domain.

While this study demonstrated that learning occurred in all learning domains, the majority of learning clearly occurred within the domains *practical competence* and *interpersonal competence*. Generally, practical competence refers to personal skill development such us time management, professionalism, and goal setting (CAS, 2012). Interpersonal competence generally refers to the ability to work with others through team building, collaboration, and leadership (CAS, 2012). These findings are supported by the literature. In fact, Kuh (1995) and Kuh and Lund (1994) found that student leadership experiences contributed disproportionately to gains in practical competence and interpersonal competence.

Relative to the other learning domains, there appeared to be little learning across the domains *knowledge acquisition, construction, integration, and application* and *humanitarianism and civic engagement*. These findings were somewhat supported by the literature and therefore not surprising. From the literature reviewed, gains in knowledge acquisition, construction, integration, and application as a result of participating in co-curricular activities, were small. Kuh (1995) cited that learning in this area is typically associated with academic activities such as classroom learning.

The literature corresponding to learning in the domain *humanitarianism and civic engagement* is mixed. Like Kuh and Lund (1994), this study did not find that participating in student government led to gains in this domain. This is perhaps not surprising as the methodology for this study closely matched that of Kuh and Lund. Other studies found that student leadership positions lead to gains in humanitarianism (Kuh et al., 1991; Pascarella et al., 1999; Schuh & Laverty, 1983).

Finally, and contrary to the literature, this study did not find much learning in the competency *understanding and appreciation of cultural human differences* (within the domain *humanitarianism and civic engagement*). The literature points to learning in this area as a result of interactions with those from a different racial-ethnic group (Antonio, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001; Asada et al., 2003; Astin, 1993; Dey, 1991; Friedlander & MacDougall, 1992; Hurtado et al., 1995; Kitchener et al., 2002; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Smith, 1993; Terenzini et al., 1994; Wright et al., 1997). The SA was an ethnically diverse group; approximately half were of Caucasian decent and half were of South East Asian descent. Despite this, none of the participants commented on this aspect or demonstrated any gains in learning as a result of this diversity. One explanation could be

that the ethnic make-up of the SA was reflective of the entire University and community in which the University was situated. Therefore, it is possible that the ethnic make-up of the group was not a factor or meaningful to the members. Another explanation could be that the participants did not feel comfortable talking about this topic as it is often viewed as sensitive and potentially polarizing. Nonetheless, this was an interesting finding given the amount of literature that pointed to learning as a result of interacting with others from a different racial-ethnic group.

The Experiences That Led to Learning

The third research question this investigation endeavored to determine was what kinds of experiences in student government led to learning. Through the analysis of the data, the majority of experiences that positively influenced learning fit into four broad categories. They were experiences that related to: (a) interaction with others; (b) event planning; (c) managing priorities and stress; and (d) the overall experience. Each category is discussed next.

Source of learning: Interactions with others. The impact that the interactions between SA members had on learning cannot be over-emphasized. In fact, it was clear from the experiences shared by the participants that their interaction and involvement with others had the single biggest influence on their learning.

Interacting with others positively impacted learning across all competencies of the domain *interdependence*. This was not surprising as all four competencies (*meaningful relationships, interdependence, collaboration, and effective leadership*) directly relate to working with others. Interactions between members of the SA also influenced learning in

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the domains *intrapersonal development*, *practical competence*, and to a lesser degree *cognitive complexity*.

Experiences in team meetings and facing conflict with others were often cited as specific examples of how interaction with others led to learning. While not necessarily reflected in the literature on co-curricular learning, Kolb (1984) identified that conflict has a role in learning. He argued that people do not enter into learning situations with a "blank slate"; rather, they enter them with at least some idea or preconceived notions of the topic at hand. In any learning experience then, the learner disposes or modifies new ideas. Kolb explains that conflict can often arise when a learner is resistant to modifying their beliefs.

The important impact that interacting with others has on learning is supported by a number of authors (Aleman, 1994, 1997; Baxter Magolda, 1992a; Kuh, 1995; Lamport, 1994; Love & Goodsell Love, 1995; Moffatt, 1991; Rendon & Jalomo, 1993; Terenzini et al., 1996). In fact, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) suggest that peer interactions are "a dominant force" in learning. Specifically, Kuh (1995) reported that peer interactions were also instrumental in the development of interpersonal competence and cognitive complexity.

In another study, Lehr (2002) found that participating in student government positively influences interpersonal competence, for which he makes a strong case of its importance. He writes:

> Equipped with interpersonal competence, a student is able to solve problems, lead a group to achieve a common task, and interact successfully in social environments and sensitive situations. In essence, a student has the ability to develop into a productive worker and citizen. Without it, a student may literally fail no matter how valid the student's endeavor or how sincere the effort. (p. vi)

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The findings of this study supported literature that found peer interactions to have a positive impact on moral reasoning (Finger et al., 1992; Lind, 1997; Rest & Narvaez, 1991). This study found that working with others and specifically facing conflict with others positively impacted learning in the competency *commitment to ethics and integrity*.

Some of this study's findings on the impact of peer interactions were not found elsewhere in the literature. Gains in the competency *communicating effectively* (within the domain *practical competence*) could be attributed to peer interactions for nine participants in this study and gains in the competency *realistic self-appraisal, self-understanding, and self-respect* (within the domain *intrapersonal development*) could also be attributed to peer interactions for 11 of the participants in this study.

Source of learning: Event planning. Thirteen participants highlighted their experiences planning events for the SA. This activity was consistently identified as an important part of their role. The participants demonstrated, through their reflections, that the experience of event planning led to learning across the domains: *knowledge acquisition, construction, integration, and application*; *interpersonal competence*; and *practical competence*.

Planning events provided an opportunity to put into practice classroom learning. For some, planning events for the SA afforded an opportunity to implement strategies learned in marketing, communication, and event planning courses. This practice demonstrated that these participants achieved learning in the competency *relating knowledge to daily life*. Considering that two or more individuals planned most events, it

is not surprising that event planning also led to learning across the domain *interpersonal competence*. Many participants also demonstrated gains in the domain *practical competence* as a result of event planning. They spoke about the value of planning and organization skills in planning successful events. This skill development demonstrates the attainment of the competency *managing personal affairs*.

      Source of learning: Managing priorities and stress. Every participant reflected on their ability to better manage their priorities and stress as a result of participating in the SA. Through the experience of managing their priorities and stress, the participants demonstrated that they had learned four competencies found in the domain *practical competence*.

      Members of the SA self-identified as having multiple and competing roles; they were not only members of the SA but also students, and they had family obligations, commitments to friends, and many of them also had part-time jobs. All 14 participants reflected on strategies they had developed and used to balance and find meaning in all of their roles. Through these reflections, the participants demonstrated they had learning in the competency *managing personal affairs* and *living a purposeful and satisfying life.*

      Eight participants identified that the skill of managing priorities and stress is transferable to other aspects of their life and, most notably, a skill that they would be able to use throughout the careers. This reflection demonstrated learning in the competency *managing career development*. Finally, eight participants cited the strategy of goal setting as a way to help manage priorities and stress and demonstrating learning in the competency *pursuing goals.*

Source of learning: Reflection on the overall experience. The interview process itself seemed to facilitate learning as it served as a vehicle for the participants to reflect on their most significant experiences participating in the SA. When considering the process of preparing for the interview and the interview itself in the context of Kolb's theory, it is possible to conceive that the participants moved through two phases of Kolb's cycle of experiential learning: (a) the *reflective observation* phase during which time the learner begins to make personal sense of the experience; and (b) the *abstract conceptualization* phase, when the learner creates sound hypotheses, implications, and/or strategies for actions. The 14 participants demonstrated these phases when they showed their ability to think and rethink previous assumptions and consider alternative solutions when considering how they would approach their role in the SA again if given the opportunity. This ability also demonstrated that the participants achieved learning in the competencies *critical and reflective thinking* (within the domain *cognitive complexity*).

Transformational Learning: Understanding of Self

One of the most apparent findings of the study was the impact that the experience participating in student government had on the participants' sense of self. Without a doubt, participating in the SA was a transformational experience. Through their interviews, 11 of the 14 participants demonstrated that their experiences in the SA had led to their development of the competency *realistic self-appraisal, self-understanding, and self-respect* (within the domain *intrapersonal development*).

During their insightful and personal reflections, participants demonstrated a

profound understanding of their values, strengths, and weaknesses as a result of their experiences in the SA. For many, this learning was a result of experiences working with others, particularly during conflict or disagreements, once again signaling the impact that working with others has on learning. It is also worth noting that for many of the participants, the deeper sense of self that emerged from the experiences in student government provided them some clarity on career choices and development.

In *Learning Reconsidered*, ACPA and NASPA (2004) make an argument that moves the focus of education from the transfer of knowledge towards one that is more holistic and fosters identity development and transformation. ACPA and NASPA argue that:

> When the goals of education are to produce "*intentional learners* who can adapt to new environments, integrate knowledge from difference sources and continue learning throughout their lives" (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2002, p. xi), we must give priority to identity development and to changing the ways in which students conceive their roles, abilities and contributions in the larger society. (p. 11)

As evidenced by this study, participating in student government does afford a transformational learning opportunity for those involved and contributes to holistic education.

<center>**Chapter Six: Summary and Conclusions**</center>

The objectives of this study were met. Through semi-structured interview questions posed to the student government of a small urban university in Ontario, this study was able to determine: (a) if students learned as a result of their experiences in student government; (b) what students learned as a result of their experiences in student government; and (c) what experiences in student government lead to learning. This chapter summarizes the findings, according to the research questions, and presents conclusions including limitations of the study and recommendations for future research.

Research Question 1: Do Students Learn From Their Participation in Student Government?

This study demonstrated that learning does indeed happen as a result of participating in student government. Kolb's (1984) theory of experiential learning provided the framework for understanding how one could learn through the transformation of experiences in student government. According to Kolb, learning is a four-phase process that begins with an experience. As the learner reflects and creates personal meaning from the experience, they form next steps, actions, or hypotheses that then become a new experience, thereby beginning the learning process again. It is clear from this investigation that student government is rich with experiences from which students can create meaning and learn.

Research Question 2: What Do Students Learn From Their participation in Student Government?

Students achieved learning in all six learning domains of the CAS learning and

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development outcomes. As CAS is considered best practice for student affairs programs and services, achieving all of the learning domains signals the significance of participating in student government as a learning experience.

The majority of learning occurs within the domains *practical competence* and *interpersonal competence*. All participants achieved learning in at least three of the eight competencies of *practical competence,* which refers to personal skill development such us time management, professionalism, and goal setting (CAS, 2012). All participants achieved learning in the domain *interpersonal competence* with the majority achieving learning across all four competencies that make up the domain. Generally, *interpersonal competence* refers to the ability to work with others through team building, collaboration, and leadership (CAS, 2012). The impact of working with others on learning was a significant finding and reoccurring theme in this research.

Almost all of the participants demonstrated learning in at least one competency of the domains *cognitive complexity* and *intrapersonal development.* Interestingly and importantly, the majority of learning in these domains was demonstrated through the interview process itself. That is, the interview fostered reflection in all of the participants about their experiences in student government. This finding substantiates the importance of reflection in the learning process and signals to the student affairs practitioner the need to embed reflection in co-curricular programs and activities. Further investigation is suggested in order to develop strategies and best practices here.

Finally this study demonstrated that the least amount of learning occurred in the domains *knowledge acquisition, construction, integration and application,* and *humanitarianism and civic engagement*. Given the former is a domain typically

associated with classroom learning, this finding was not surprising. However it was surprising the students did not achieve learning in the latter when considering the nature of their roles in fostering volunteerism and service to others. This warrants further investigation.

Research Question 3: What Types of Experiences Lead to Learning?

The majority of experiences that led to learning fit into four broad categories: (a) interaction with others; (b) event planning; (c) managing priorities and stress; and (d) the overall experience. Understanding this is helpful in considering the practical applications of this research for student affairs programs and services. Specifically, attention can be focused on experiences that lead to learning. For example, this study showed that conflict with others consistently led to learning. Knowing this, programs and supports that are focused around conflict resolution could be beneficial and facilitate learning for students in leadership roles.

Research Limitations

The sample size of participants (14) is a clear limitation of this research. This and the fact that the sample was drawn from one student government from a single institution makes it difficult to draw conclusions about learning in other student governments with 100% certainty.

The methodology relied on memories, opinions, reflections, and to some degree the amount of time and effort that each participant spent preparing for the interview. The very personal and subjective recounts may have resulted in inaccuracies in the findings and missed opportunities for a complete understanding of the learning.

The methodology did not account for experiences outside of the student

government. It is likely that learning achieved by the participants was impacted by other

factors such as experiences in the classroom, outside of the classroom, and with other

friends. Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) state that the

> effects of specific experiences within college programs, conditions, or experiences
> consistently appear to be smaller than the overall net effect of college. This is no
> surprise since it probably unreasonable to expect any single experience to be a
> significant determinant of change. **(**p. 655)

Recommendations for Future Research

Two recommendations have been noted above, namely further investigation around

the role that participating in student government has on the development of competencies

around humanitarianism and developing best practices in order to embed reflection in co-

curricular programs. The limitations of this study guide some of the additional

recommendations for future research. First and foremost, replicating this research to student

governments in other universities would help to account for possible variances among

student governments and universities. In addition, an investigation with a larger sample size

would contribute to the efficacy of this study. Along the same lines, a larger sample size

could afford an understanding of variances depending on demographic factors such as age,

gender and ethnicity.

It was clear that many participants in the SA chose to be involved because they

felt that the experience would contribute to their career development. This finding

presents a research opportunity to determine the long-term impact of involvement in

student government on career development, possibly through a longitudinal study. A

study such as this supports Desmarais et al. (2013) and Wiggers and Arnold (2011) who advocate for the need to create and measure conditions and experiences that foster the development of transferable workplace skills.

ACPA and NASPA (2004) make an argument that moves the focus of education from the transfer of knowledge towards one that is more holistic and fosters identity development and transformation. The impact that participating in student government had on the participants' understanding of self was a remarkable outcome of this research. Eleven of the 14 participants self-identified that they had developed a stronger sense of self as a result of participating in student government. Further studies that intentionally investigate transformational learning in co-curricular activities would be valid and congruent with ACPA and NASPA objectives.

One final recommendation for future research corresponds to the CAS learning domain *knowledge acquisition, construction, integration, and application* where little learning seemed to occur as a result of participating in student government. When one considers that this domain closely relates to classroom learning (Kuh, 1995), this finding is not surprising; however, it does raise the question of why learning in this domain is absent and positions a study that explores how student affairs practitioners might be more intentional with their programming to create conditions that foster learning within this domain and/or connect their programs more intentionally to support and foster learning that happens within the curriculum.

Conclusions

The formal curriculum is undeniably the foundation for any institution of higher learning. The benefits that out-of-class experiences, such as participating in student government, can have on student learning are also undeniable. Ranging from gains in the ability to work effectively with others, critical thinking, and time management skills, co-curricular experiences not only allow students to put into practice things that they learn in the classroom but also provide a vehicle for students to build skills and competencies not learned in the classroom. As a result, participating in student government could be considered an activity rich in learning and therefore one that could justify time and resources in student affairs programs and services being spent to foster and promote.

Students should be empowered to author their own learning experiences both inside and outside the classroom. Institutions should pay more focused attention to foster and support involvement outside the classroom and also should clearly articulate what students can learn in various co-curricular activities and the context in which they will learn them.

Central to this study was how students made meaning of their experiences in student government. The last words then are from three of the study's participants, who provide a powerful summary of the impact that co-curricular experiences can have on learning and personal transformations.

> As a whole, it was amazing. I had the opportunity to take part in a university student association. I was given roles and responsibilities that I was never given in the classroom. In fact, I probably learned more sitting on that association that year than I did in some of my classes. (4th-year university student and study participant)

Being part of this student association gave me amazing skills and opened up my eyes to what it's going to be like to work in the real world and working with different people. (3rd-year university student and study participant)

I think that this experience has been really great for me; it's changed a lot about me. I was a quiet and shy person in high school and now I have a lot more confidence. I am now looking into going into … a profession where I am making a difference and helping others. (3rd-year university student and study participant)

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CAS Learning and Development Outcomes
CAS Contextual Statement

The Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) promotes standards to enhance opportunities for student learning and development from higher education programs and services. In 2003 CAS articulated sixteen domains of learning outcomes in response to the increased shift in attention being paid by educators and their stakeholders from higher education inputs (i.e., standards and benchmarks) to the outcomes of students attending higher education. However, in 2008 after the publication of *Learning Reconsidered 2* (2006), CAS reviewed the learning outcomes it had promoted and decided an integration of both learning outcome documents would enhance the profession's efforts in promoting student learning and development. Consequently, CAS hosted a "think tank" involving writers of *Learning Considered 2*, CAS directors, and prominent practitioners and faculty members in student affairs to make recommendations for a revised learning outcomes document.

Upon recommendations of the think tank, CAS revised the student learning and development outcomes into six broad categories (called domains): knowledge acquisition, construction, integration and application; cognitive complexity; intrapersonal development; interpersonal competence; humanitarianism and civic engagement; and practical competence. To comply with CAS standards, institutional programs and services must identify relevant and desirable learning from these domains, assess relevant and desirable learning, and articulate how their programs and services contribute to domains not specifically assessed. For each of the domains, CAS offers examples illustrating achievement of the student learning outcomes.

This learning outcomes model further defines or clarifies each of the six domains by identifying learning outcome dimensions. Offering dimensions of learning within corresponding domains allows for a more focused assessment approach based on institutional mission and priorities. The revised CAS learning outcomes document a) heightens the differentiation of interpersonal competence and interpersonal development (though certainly the two influence each other), b) highlights the integration of humanitarianism and civic engagement, and c) adds the dimensions of global perspective and technological competence to important learning outcomes.

The CAS Board of Directors reviewed and approved the six domains, learning outcome dimensions, and examples of learning and development outcomes at its October 2008 meeting. The domains and learning outcome dimensions were embedded in each functional area standard. Examples were referenced in each functional area standard and appear in the chart that follows.

Reference

Keeling, R. (Ed.). (2006). *Learning reconsidered 2: Implementing a campus-wide focus on the student experience.* American College Personnel Association, Association of College and University Housing Officers-International, Association of College Unions-International, National Academic Advising Association, National Association for Campus Activities, National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, National Intramural-Recreational Sports Association.

Contributor: Jan Arminio, Shippensburg University, NACA

CAS Learning and Development Outcomes[1]

Student Outcome Domain[2]	Dimensions of Outcome Domains	Examples of Learning and Development Outcomes
Knowledge acquisition, construction, integration, and application	Understanding knowledge from a range of disciplines	Possesses knowledge of human cultures and the physical world; possesses knowledge of [a specific] one or more subjects
	Connecting knowledge to other knowledge, ideas, and experiences	Uses multiple sources of information and their synthesis to solve problems; knows how to access diverse sources of information such as the internet, text observations, and data bases
	Constructing knowledge	Personalizes learning; makes meaning from text, instruction, and experience; uses experience and other sources of information to create new insights; generates new problem-solving approaches based on new insights; recognizes one's own capacity to create new understandings from learning activities and dialogue with others
	Relating knowledge to daily life	Seeks new information to solve problems; relates knowledge to major and career decisions; makes connections between classroom and out-of-classroom learning; articulates career choices based on assessment of interests, values, skills, and abilities; provides evidence of knowledge, skills, and accomplishments resulting from formal education, work experience, community service, and volunteer experiences, for example in resumes and portfolios
Cognitive complexity	Critical thinking	Identifies important problems, questions, and issues; analyzes, interprets, and makes judgments of the relevance and quality of information; assesses assumptions and considers alternative perspectives and solutions[3]
	Reflective thinking	Applies previously understood information, concepts, and experiences to a new situation or setting; rethinks previous assumptions
	Effective reasoning	Uses complex information from a variety of sources including personal experience and observation to form a decision or opinion; is open to new ideas and perspectives
	Creativity	Integrates mental, emotional, and creative processes for increased insight; formulates a new approach to a particular problem
Intrapersonal development	Realistic self-appraisal, self-understanding, and self-respect	Assesses, articulates, and acknowledges personal skills, abilities, and growth areas; uses self-knowledge to make decisions such as those related to career choices; articulates rationale for personal

		behavior; seeks and considers feedback from others; critiques and subsequently learns from past experiences; employs self-reflection to gain insight; functions without need for constant reassurance from others; balances needs of self with needs of others
	Identity development	Integrates multiple aspects of identity into a coherent whole; recognizes and exhibits interdependence in accordance with environmental, cultural, and personal values; identifies and commits to important aspects of self
	Commitment to ethics and integrity	Incorporates ethical reasoning into action; explores and articulates the values and principles involved in personal decision-making; acts in congruence with personal values and beliefs; exemplifies dependability, honesty, and trustworthiness; accepts personal accountability
	Spiritual awareness	Develops and articulates personal belief system; understands roles of spirituality in personal and group values and behaviors; critiques, compares, and contrasts various belief systems; explores issues of purpose, meaning, and faith
Interpersonal competence	Meaningful relationships	Establishes healthy, mutually beneficial relationships with others; treats others with respect; manages interpersonal conflicts effectively; demonstrates appropriately assertive behavior
	Interdependence	Seeks help from others when needed and offers assistance to others; shares a group or organizational goal and works with others to achieve it; learns from the contributions and involvement of others; accepts supervision and direction as needed
	Collaboration	Works cooperatively with others, including people different from self and/or with different points of view; seeks and values the involvement of others; listens to and considers others' points of view
	Effective leadership	Demonstrates skill in guiding and assisting a group, organization, or community in meeting its goals; identifies and understands the dynamics of a group; exhibits democratic principles as a leader or group member; communicates a vision, mission, or purpose that encourages commitment and action in others
Humanitarianism and Civic Engagement	Understanding and appreciation of cultural and human differences	Understands one's own identity and culture; seeks involvement with people different from oneself; articulates the advantages and impact of a diverse society; identifies systematic barriers to equality and inclusiveness, then advocates and justifies means for dismantling them; in interactions with others, exhibits respect and preserves the dignity of others
	Global perspective	Understands and analyzes the interconnectedness of

		societies worldwide; demonstrates effective stewardship of human, economic, and environmental resources
	Social responsibility	Recognizes social systems and their influence on people; appropriately challenges the unfair, unjust, or uncivil behavior of other individuals or groups; participates in service/volunteer activities that are characterized by reciprocity; articulates the values and principles involved in personal decision-making; affirms and values the worth of individuals and communities
	Sense of civic responsibility	Demonstrates consideration of the welfare of others in decision-making; engages in critical reflection and principled dissent; understands and participates in relevant governance systems; educates and facilitates the civic engagement of others
Practical competence	Pursuing goals	Sets and pursues individual goals; articulates rationale for personal and educational goals and objectives; articulates and makes plans to achieve long-term goals and objectives; identifies and works to overcome obstacles that hamper goal achievement
	Communicating effectively	Conveys meaning in a way that others understand by writing and speaking coherently and effectively; writes and speaks after reflection; influences others through writing, speaking or artistic expression; effectively articulates abstract ideas; uses appropriate syntax and grammar; makes and evaluates presentations or performances; listens attentively to others and responds appropriately
	Technological competence	Demonstrates technological literacy and skills; demonstrates the ethical application of intellectual property and privacy; uses technology ethically and effectively to communicate, solve problems, and complete tasks; stays current with technological innovations
	Managing personal affairs	Exhibits self-reliant behaviors; manages time effectively; develops strategies for managing finances
	Managing career development	Takes steps to initiate a job search or seek advanced education; constructs a resume based on clear job objectives and with evidence of knowledge, skills, and abilities; recognizes the importance of transferrable skills
	Demonstrating professionalism	Accepts supervision and direction as needed; values the contributions of others; holds self accountable for obligations; shows initiative; assesses, critiques, and then improves the quality of one's work and one's work environment

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| | Maintaining health and wellness | Engages in behaviors and contributes to environments that promote health and reduce risk; articulates the relationship between health and wellness in accomplishing goals; exhibits behaviors that advance the health of communities |
| | Living a purposeful and satisfying life | Makes purposeful decisions regarding balance among education, work, and leisure time; acts in congruence with personal identity, ethical, spiritual, and moral values |

[1] This document is an adaptation of *Learning Reconsidered* and the CAS Learning Outcomes
[2] Categories adapted from *Learning Reconsidered (2004)* and Kuh, Douglas, Lund, & Ramin Gyurmek (1994)
[3] These examples are adopted from the George Mason University *Critical Thinking Assessment Report* (2006)

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- Approved as revised by CAS Board of Directors, October 19, 2008

Appendix B

Student Association Constitution
(Retrieved from Student Association Terms of Reference Website, January 2011)

████████████████████

THE CONSTITUTION OF THE

████████████████████████████████

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1. The ████████████████████████ (hereafter referred to as the ████ or the Association) will play an integral role in community building and student representation at the ████████████████

2. Since the ████ is composed of elected students, it is responsible for unifying the ████████████████████ student population through the planning and implementation of social, cultural and academic events and activities.

3. The ████ will raise, discuss, and act upon issues of concern to students of the ████████████████

4. The Members of the ████ shall be elected by a vote open to all ████████████████ ████ students at an annual election. They shall consist of the: President, Vice-President of Academics, Vice-President of Activities, Vice-President of Communications, Vice-President of Finance, Vice-President of Operations and Program Representatives.

5. These representatives shall form the ████ government.

6. The President, Vice-President of Academics, Vice-President of Activities, Vice-President of Communications, Vice-President of Finance, and Vice-President of Operations shall form the executive body of the ████

7. All ████ business shall be managed by the ████ government, which shall meet on a regular basis. All elected members of the ████ shall be entitled to one vote each at every official meeting of the ████

8. An amendment of the Terms of Reference shall require a motion to be submitted in writing to the ████ council. The motion must be prominently publicized one week prior to the meeting at which it will be discussed. The motion must be passed by a 2/3 majority of those voting, quorum being present.

9. The ████ is also responsible for maintaining relationships with the University of ████████ Administration, ████████████████████ ████████ and the ████████████████

Appendix C

Letter of Informed Consent

MEMORIAL
UNIVERSITY

Faculty of Education

St. John's, NL Canada A1B 3X8
Tel.: 709 737 3403   Fax: 709 737 2345
www.mun.ca

October 5, 2009

Dear XXXX,

My name is Catherine Salole and I am a graduate student in the Faculty of Education at Memorial University of Newfoundland.   I am writing to request your voluntary participation in my research.

As part of my Masters of Education in Post Secondary Studies, I am required to complete a thesis. My thesis is entitled *Co-curricular Learning: An exploration of what students learn from their experiences participating in student government.* My research is being supervised by XXXXXX, a professor in the Faculty of Education at Memorial University of Newfoundland.

The purpose of my research is to learn more about the learning that happens outside of the classroom. Over the past 15 years, research has revealed that the co-curricular environment has a significant potential to increase student learning and development. However, relatively little is known about involvement in student governments particularly in Canadian universities and colleges.   By participating in this research, you will be contributing to our understanding as well as potentially allowing you to reflect upon your own learning and development.

If you agree to participate in my research, your involvement would be one 1-1.5 hour interview with me at a mutually convenient time and place during October or November 2009. The interview will consist of 7 semi-structured questions that surround your experiences belonging to the 2008-2009 XXXX Student Association. You will be given the questions prior to the interview to allow you time to reflect upon and recall your experiences. The interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed after the interview.

All information gathered in this study is strictly confidential and every reasonable effort will be made to ensure the privacy and confidentiality of participants. The results of the study may be published and direct quotes of participants may be used.   Participant's names and positions held in the GHSA will not be identified. If direct quotes are used in any publications, care will be taken to ensure that they are general in nature and cannot be associated to a particular individual. Despite this, identification is likely, particularly for the executive members, given the small number of potential participants. The digital recordings will be encrypted and transcripts will be held in a locked and secure location. Both will be destroyed after publication and the appropriate peer review process has occurred. Interviews may be transcribed by a research assistant who will not be associated with the XXXX. Only I and my research assistant will have access to the digital recordings. Only I and Professor XXXX (Research Supervisor) will have access to the transcripts.

I believe that it is unlikely that harm will come to you as a result of participating in this study. I would ensure that you receive appropriate support if you were to experience any stress or anxiety while participating in the study.

The proposal for this research has been reviewed by the Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research and found to be in compliance with Memorial University's ethics policy. If you have ethical concerns about the research (such as the way you have been treated or your rights as a participant), you may contact the Chairperson of ICEHR at icehr@mun.ca or by telephone at (709) 737-8368.

In addition, I have been granted approval to conduct this research by XXXX Research Ethics Board concerns can also be directed to XXXX Research Department.

Participation in this research is voluntary and not binding. If you choose to participate, you may decline or withdraw at any time during the research project without negative consequences.

Finally, I am undertaking this research as a student of Memorial University of Newfoundland. My research is TOTALLY UNRELATED to the position I hold at the XXXX. Any participation or lack thereof will not affect you, your studies, reputation or involvement at the XXXX whatsoever.

If you are in agreement to participate in this study, please contact me by phone at or email. You must sign the consent form on the next page and return it to me prior to your interview.

If you have any questions or concerns , please do not hesitate in contacting me. You may also contact my supervisor XXXX.

Thank you for considering my research.

Sincerely,

Catherine Salole

Appendix D

Confirmation of Participation Letter

MEMORIAL
UNIVERSITY

Faculty of Education

St. John's, NL Canada A1B 3X8
Tel.: 709 737 3403   Fax: 709 737 2345
www.mun.ca

October 15, 2009

Dear XXXX,

Thank you for agreeing to participate in my study, *Co-curricular Learning: An exploration of what students learn from their experiences participating in student government.*   Once again the purpose of the study is to explore the learning that happens outside of the classroom.   Specifically, I am interested in knowing what you learned and how you make meaning of your experiences belonging to the 2008-2009 XXXX.

I expect the interview will last 1 – 1.5 hours. During the interview I will ask you to recall a variety of your experiences and what you learned from them.   Please take some time to consider the following questions prior to our meeting, they will guide our discussion:

1. Why did you want to become part of the XXXX?
2. Did you have any goals set prior to your term in the XXXX? Did you meet them?
3. What were your responsibilities? What did you learn from them?
4. Did you take on any special tasks/projects that were outside of your normal responsibilities? What did you learn from them?
5. What were the most significant experiences(s) or major highlights working on the XXXX? What did you learn from them?
6. Tell me about some of the challenges or low points during your term? What did you learn from them?
7. What are the successes/achievements that you are most proud of from your work on the XXXXX? What did you learn from them?
8. Did you make any mistakes? Have any failures? Anything that could have gone better? What did you learn from them?
9. Tell me about your experiences working with others? What did you learn from them?
10. How are you different as a result of your experiences working on the XXXX?
11. What, if anything, would you do differently if given the opportunity?

I look forward to seeing you on Wednesday October 21st at 3:00pm in Room XXXX.

Feel free to contact me should you have any questions or concerns.

Sincerely,

Catherine Salole

Appendix E

Interview Probes and Stem Questions

1. What was your position?
2. Had you held any similar positions in the past? Was this the first time on the SA or participating in student government? If yes, what were they?
3. Why did you want to become part of the SA?
4. Did you set any goals prior to your term in the SA? Did you meet them?
5. What were your responsibilities?
6. What did you learn from these experiences? About yourself? About others?
7. What role did you play in these experiences?
8. What did you learn as a result of the role you played?
9. If presented with a similar situation, would you handle it in a similar way? Different way?
10. What knowledge, skills and values did you develop because of these experiences?
11. How did you grow professionally because of these experiences?
12. How did you grow personally because of these experiences?
13. Did you take on any special tasks/projects that were outside of your normal responsibilities?
    a. What did you learn from these experiences? About yourself? About others?
    b. What role did you play in these experiences?
    c. What did you learn as a result of the role you played?
    d. If presented with a similar situation, would you handle it in a similar way? Different way?
    e. What knowledge, skills and values did you develop because of these experiences?
    f. How did you grow professionally because of these experiences?
    g. How did you grow personally because of these experiences?
14. What were the most significant experiences(s) or major highlights working on the SA? What did you learn from them?
    a. What did you learn from these experiences? About yourself? About others?
    b. What role did you play in these experiences?
    c. What did you learn as a result of the role you played?
    d. If presented with a similar situation, would you handle it in a similar way? Different way?

      e.   What knowledge, skills and values did you develop because of these experiences?

      f.   How did you grow professionally because of these experiences?

      g.   How did you grow personally because of these experiences?

15. Tell me about some of the challenges or low points during your term? What did you learn from them?

      a.   What did you learn from these experiences? About yourself? About others?

      b.   What role did you play in these experiences?

      c.   What did you learn as a result of the role you played?

      d.   If presented with a similar situation, would you handle it in a similar way? Different way?

      e.   What knowledge, skills and values did you develop because of these experiences?

      f.   How did you grow professionally because of these experiences?

      g.   How did you grow personally because of these experiences?

16. What are the successes/achievements that you are most proud of from your work on the SA? What did you learn from them?

      a.   What did you learn from these experiences? About yourself? About others?

      b.   What role did you play in these experiences?

      c.   What did you learn as a result of the role you played?

      d.   If presented with a similar situation, would you handle it in a similar way? Different way?

      e.   What knowledge, skills and values did you develop because of these experiences?

      f.   How did you grow professionally because of these experiences?

      g.   How did you grow personally because of these experiences?

17. Did you make any mistakes? Have any failures? Experiences that could have gone better? What did you learn?

      a.   What did you learn from these experiences? About yourself? About others?

      b.   What role did you play in these experiences?

      c.   What did you learn as a result of the role you played?

      d.   If presented with a similar situation, would you handle it in a similar way? Different way?

      e.   What knowledge, skills and values did you develop because of these experiences?

      f.   How did you grow professionally because of these experiences?

g.　How did you grow personally because of these experiences?

18. Tell me about your experiences working with others? What did you learn from them?
    a.　What did you learn from these experiences? About yourself? About others?
    b.　What role did you play in these experiences?
    c.　What did you learn as a result of the role you played?
    d.　If presented with a similar situation, would you handle it in a similar way? Different way?
    e.　What knowledge, skills and values did you develop because of these experiences?
    f.　How did you grow professionally because of these experiences?
    g.　How did you grow personally because of these experiences?
19. How are you different as a result of your experiences working on the GHSA?
20. What did you learn from these experiences? About yourself? About others?
21. What role did you play in these experiences?
22. What did you learn as a result of the role you played?
23. If presented with a similar situation, would you handle it in a similar way? Different way?
24. What knowledge, skills and values did you develop because of these experiences?
25. How did you grow professionally because of these experiences?
26. How did you grow personally because of these experiences?
27. What, if anything, would you do differently if given the opportunity?
    a.　What did you learn from these experiences? About yourself? About others?
    b.　What role did you play in these experiences?
    c.　What did you learn as a result of the role you played?
    d.　If presented with a similar situation, would you handle it in a similar way? Different way?
    e.　What knowledge, skills and values did you develop because of these experiences?
    f.　How did you grow professionally because of these experiences?
    g.　How did you grow personally because of these experiences?
28. Do you have anything else to add about your overall experience and how you make meaning from and learned from it?
    a.　What did you learn from these experiences? About yourself? About others?
    b.　What role did you play in these experiences?

c. What did you learn as a result of the role you played?
d. If presented with a similar situation, would you handle it in a similar way? Different way?
e. What knowledge, skills and values did you develop because of these experiences?
f. How did you grow professionally because of these experiences?
g. How did you grow personally because of these experiences?

Appendix F

Ethics Letters

**Interdisciplinary Committee on
Ethics in Human Research (ICEHR)**

Office of Research
St. John's, NL Canada A1C 5S7
Tel: 709 737 8368   Fax: 709 737 4612
www.mun.ca

August 13, 2009

ICEHR No. 2008/09-167-ED
Ms. Catherine Salole
Faculty of Education
Memorial University of Newfoundland

Dear Ms. Salole:

Thank you for your email of August 12, 2009 addressing the issues raised by the Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research (ICEHR) concerning your research project *"Co-curricular learning: an exploration of what students learn from their experiences participating in student government"*.

The ICEHR has re-examined the proposal with the clarification and revisions submitted and is satisfied that concerns raised by the Committee have been adequately addressed. In accordance with the *Tri-Council Policy Statement on Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans* (TCPS), the project has been granted full *ethics approval* for one year from the date of this letter.
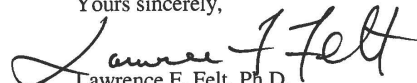
Although ethics clearance has been granted, we note that in your revised consent letter Mr. Shea's contact information is still part of the ICEHR statement. As mentioned in our earlier letter, the ICEHR statement should be in a paragraph on its own separated from all other contact information. Participants should contact ICEHR, not Mr. Shea, if they have <u>ethical concerns</u> about your research. They can contact Mr. Shea if they have questions regarding your research.

If you intend to make changes during the course of the project which may give rise to ethical concerns, please forward a description of these changes to the ICEHR Co-ordinator, Mrs. Eleanor Butler, at <u>ebutler@mun.ca</u> for the Committee's consideration.

The TCPS requires that you submit an annual status report to ICEHR on your project, should the research carry on beyond *August 2010*. Also, to comply with the TCPS, please notify us upon completion of your project.

We wish you success with your research.

Yours sincerely,

Lawrence F. Felt, Ph.D.
Chair, Interdisciplinary Committee on
Ethics in Human Research

LF/bl

copy: Supervisor – Mr. Rob Shea, Faculty of Education

Appendix G

Table G.1

Table G.1 *Summary of Findings According to Learning Domain and Competency*

Learning domain	Percentage of total learning	Learning competency	No. of participants who achieved each competency (n =14)	Learning experiences
Knowledge, acquisition, construction, integration & application	3.7%	Understanding knowledge from a range of disciplines	0	
		Connecting knowledge to other knowledge ideas and experiences	0	
		Constructing knowledge	0	
		Relating knowledge to daily life	7	event planning; overall experience
Cognitive complexity	18%	Critical thinking & Reflective thinking	14	overall experience; facing conflict
		Effective reasoning	0	
		Creativity	7	event planning
Intrapersonal development	11.5%	Realistic self-appraisal, self-understanding, and self-respect	11	working with others; facing conflict
		Identity development	2	overall experience; event planning
		Commitment to ethics and integrity	9	overall experience; working with others; facing

				conflict; event planning
		Spiritual awareness	0	
Interpersonal competence	25.1%	Meaningful relationships	14	For all dimensions: working with others; team meetings; facing conflict; planning events, association meetings, overall experience
		Interdependence	13	
		Collaboration	11	
		Effective leadership	10	
Humanitarianism and civic engagement	5.2%	Understanding and appreciation of cultural and human differences	1	event planning
		Social responsibility	1	overall experience
		Global perspective	0	
		Sense of civic responsibility	8	overall experience
Practical competence	36.1%	Pursuing goals	14	overall experience; working with others; facing conflict; association meetings; managing priorities and stress
		Communicating effectively	9	working with others; association meetings; facing conflict; overall experience
		Technological	1	N/A

competence

Managing personal affairs	14	managing priorities and stress; event planning
Managing career development	8	overall experience; working with others; managing priorities and stress
Demonstrating professionalism	14	\event planning; overall experience
Maintaining health and wellness	0	
Living a purposeful and satisfying life	9	managing priorities and stress, competing; overall experience