

Identity Matters! A Study of Undergraduate Involvement and Leadership in Student Government at Ualberta

**Research and Political Affairs
University of Alberta Students' Union
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Outline

- Why, how, what and therefore ...



The Question

- Does (and how does) identity matter in undergraduate involvement and desire to seek elected office in post-secondary student government?



Why did we do this study?

- Women constitute 56% of undergraduates at UAlberta, but they
 - Held 30% of Students' Council seats (2005-2016)
 - Were 25.2% of 102 contestants in SU Executive elections (2005-2016)
 - 5 women ran for the President's Office in past 12 years (3 were elected in 2009, 2015, 2017)
 - Were not represented in a five-member SU Executive team between 2010-2015
- Yet, women are proportionately or overrepresented at the faculty association levels



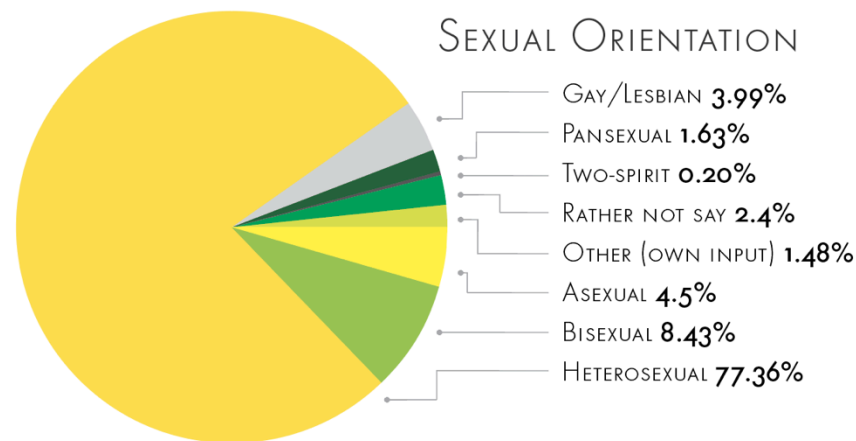
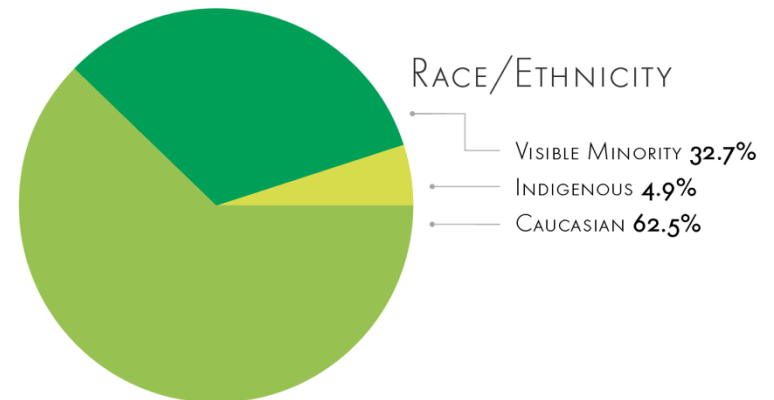
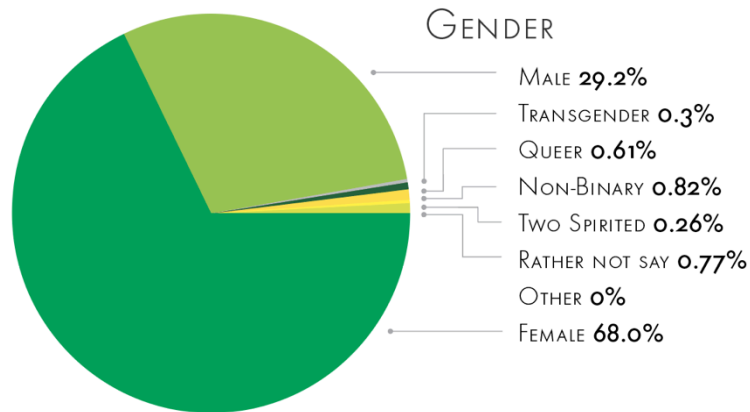
How did we do the study?

- A General Survey of undergraduate students (n=1957)
- 2 targeted surveys administered by Discover Governance among
 - Student Councillors (53% response rate), and
 - FA Executive (32% response rate)
- Qualitative interviews with former SU Executives (n=15)

- Intersectional approach* (gender, race/ethnicity, indigeneity, gender identity, sexual identity)



Participant Demographics - General Survey



Participant Demographics - FA Executives, Student Councillors & SU Executives



| | Faculty Association | Students' Council | SU Executive |
|----------------------------|---------------------|-------------------|--------------|
| Total Participants: | 30 | 17 | 15 |
| Gender | | | |
| Female | 19 | 7 | 5 |
| Male | 11 | 10 | 10 |
| Race | | | |
| Caucasian | 24 | 8 | 6 |
| Visible Minority | 4 | 8 | 9 |
| Indigenous | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| Sexual Orientation | | | |
| Heterosexual | 25 | 13 | 10 |
| Sexual Minority | 3 | 4 | 4 |
| Declined to Say | 2 | 0 | 1 |

What did we find?

- Overall, identity matters in undergraduate involvement and leadership in student government
 - Interest in seeking elected office
 - Confidence in running
 - Campaigning experience
 - Serving in Representative roles



Seeking Elected Office

- Gender plays a more significant role than race in confidence to seek elected office at the highest levels of student government, whereas race is a more significant determinant of overall desire to seek leadership positions.
- No influence of sexual identity



In [an SU election], the Gateway asked councillors why they didn't run for an executive position, and [a female councillor I knew well], who was one of the best councillors that I've ever had the privilege to serve with ... genius, phenomenal at policy, she would have made one of the best executives this university had ever seen ... She said: 'I don't know enough, I don't have enough experience, maybe In a few years.' I had the same answer, but I was only in my first year on council, and she was in her third.

- SU Executive, Male, Caucasian, Heterosexual.

One of the things I have seen very often, if you don't see yourself reflected in the structures of power, then you don't actually want to be a part of it.

- SU Executive, Male, Visible Minority, Heterosexual



Campaigning Experience

- Women are more likely to indicate that their identity shapes their campaigning experience than men.
 - How they present themselves
 - How potential voters judge and interact with them
- Role of race and sexual identity
- Role of socio-economic class (spontaneously mentioned)



Because I did more one-on-ones for exec, I faced more situations where I was asked whether I will be able to handle it because of my gender...

- SU Executive, Female, Visible Minority, Heterosexual

I came across instances where students said 'Oh you are female, are you sure you are going to be able to handle the stress?' I would just question my own abilities. Or sometimes I will get comments like I will vote for you because you are cute. Not because they have seen my platform and think I can do the job. That's quite memorable because I never thought it would bug me so much, but it did.

- SU Executive, Female, Visible Minority, Heterosexual



Experience of Serving - FA & Student Council Level

- The combination of gender and race (individually and when combined) have an adverse impact on serving experience
- Likelihood of running for higher office (SU Executive positions)
 - Again, race shapes interest but gender affects confidence



Experience of Serving - SU Executive Level (1/2)



- Gender, race and sexual identity shape interaction with internal and external stakeholders
- But, spontaneous mentions of **age** as the most significant determinant by all 15 participants



Maybe I should lower the Black level just a little bit when I go into a meeting, and not be fully who I am, because it is one of those things where there is a lot of times where... The majority of them are white, and the majority of their friend circle is white, there is that question of how me can I be. There are all these instances where you feel like you have to work to make them more comfortable.

- SU Executive, Male, Visible Minority, Heterosexual

Previously, as a councillor I had been to Executive organized events where some University senators may have called other female students or me "sweetie" – mostly by old men.

- SU Executive, Female, Visible Minority, Heterosexual



Experience of Serving - SU Executive Level (2/2)

- Relationship within members of the executive committee mostly positive and collegial experience but there are subtle gendered and racial dynamics



Summing Up

- Gender stands out as the significant determinant in experience of seeking, campaigning for, and serving in leadership role in student government.
- Need for further research
 - Comparing to other post-secondary institutions
 - Longitudinal comparisons
 - Tracking post-graduation involvement in leadership roles (including in politics)



SO NOW WHAT?



UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA
**STUDENTS'
UNION**

Encouraging Diverse Representation in Student Governance



YOU GOT THIS.

#UASUgotthis

- Awareness campaign aimed at women, non-binary individuals, and other underrepresented groups
- Encourage people to run AND to support those that do run
- Consists of posters, SUTV, Social Media and outreach

STUDENTS NEED YOU!

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Questions?



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