

Legislators' Perceptions of Public University Student Lobbying Efforts
on Public Higher Education Legislation: A Case Study

James J. Krotz & Lisa M. Rubin

Kansas State University

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Significance of the Study

Public higher education interest groups in many states are fighting increasingly constrained budgets. Worse than that, many higher education lobbying professionals now have to contend with increasingly negative views of institutions of higher education. In fact, 58% of Republicans have negative views on higher education, according to a Pew Research poll (Fingerhut, 2017).

As a result of this study, public higher education interest groups such as higher education lobbyists, student governing associations, and higher education administrators will better understand legislator perceptions of student lobbyists, and can more effectively train, prepare, or revise students' lobbying strategies. This study has implications for governmental relations or student interest groups who seek to more effectively engage and lobby members of their state legislatures. In times of constrained budgets, public higher education institutions should be looking for the most efficient ways to leverage their greatest resources: the students themselves.

More effective student lobbyists could very well mean more votes in favor of increased resources for higher education, leading to reduced tuition and addressing socioeconomic inequity in higher education. With continued divestment of public funds for higher education in states which have factions of legislators that increasingly see higher education as a private good, the findings of this study will benefit students and lobbying professionals in both states.

Review of Literature

The existing body of literature on public interest groups and their effectiveness in influencing public policy is extensive (Potter, 2003). The body of literature defining lobbying in higher education is somewhat less extensive, and less extensive still is the literature on students as lobbyists in state legislatures (Benveniste, 1985; Burgess & Miller, 2009; Longo, 2004). Literature surrounding the politics of higher education has even been described as suffering from “benign neglect” (Cook & McLendon, 1998, p. 186).

As the proliferation of student lobbying for higher education issues continues its historic upward trend, there is a need to evaluate its effectiveness. The work of Tankersley-Bankhead (2009) sought to measure student lobbyists' impact on state-level higher education public policy by surveying the students, professional higher education lobbyists, and legislators in Missouri. It was found that students employed many of the same techniques as professional lobbyists, such as relationship-building and providing information on higher education policy. However, there is a need to expand the field of inquiry beyond the borders of Missouri, and focus on the legislators' perceptions of student lobbyists to determine their effectiveness.

Theoretical Framework

Since the field of political science weighs heavily on this study, it is only appropriate to bring two theories from that field—pluralist theory and interest group theory—to serve as a framework (Loomis & Cigler, 2007; Skocpol, 2003). Pluralist theory postulates that every citizen has a voice in public policymaking and can influence legislation (Loomis & Cigler, 2007). Interest group theory posits that individuals will coalesce around a shared cause with the goal of

influencing legislators to enact their proposals (Skocpol, 2003).

Research Question & Purpose

This study aims to answer the question “are student lobbyists effective in influencing legislator’s decision-making on matters of public higher education policy in Kansas?” The purpose of this study is to understand legislator perceptions of student lobbyists and to develop more effective strategies for influencing public policy.

Definition of Key Terms

Student lobbyist: Any student enrolled at a Kansas public institution of higher education who calls, emails, or meets directly with a legislator to try to influence that legislator’s vote on an issue pertaining to higher education.

Legislator: Any one of the 125 members of the Kansas House of Representatives or 40 members of the Kansas Senate.

Methodology

To address this question, a 20-question qualitative survey addressing modes of student contact with legislators, perceived effectiveness of student lobbyists, and how familiar legislators perceive student lobbyists to be with public higher education policy issues, was sent to all 165 elected officials when the Legislature reconvened on May 1, 2017. Reminder emails were sent every Monday while the Legislature was in session. The responses were analyzed by the primary author and synthesized, cross-referenced, and analyzed by both the primary author and supervising research advisor.

The survey includes questions addressing variables such as party affiliation, legislator

perceptions of higher education issues in Kansas, frequency of contact with students, and perceptions of student lobbyists compared to professional higher education lobbyists. It was approved by the Kansas State Institutional Review Board.

Discussion of Findings

The survey was distributed to all 165 members of the Kansas Legislature, garnering a response rate of 31%.

Implications for Practice

Suggestions for Further Inquiry

Conclusion

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