Student Pressure: A National Survey of Canadian Student Organizations

Glen A. Jones

Abstract

The author reports the findings of a national study of institution-level student organizations operating in Canadian universities and community colleges. The study collected information on organization membership, fees, employees, and political activities related to the institutional and provincial government levels of authority. The level of financial and human resources available to these organizations, combined with the automatic or compulsory nature of student membership, suggests an operating environment that would be the envy of many other pressure groups in the Canadian political arena. The role of institution-level student pressure groups in the development of institutional and provincial higher education policy is discussed.

While there is a considerable body of research literature that focuses on Canadian higher education policy in terms of institutional, provincial, and federal levels of authority (e.g., Cameron, 1991; Hardy, 1988; Jones, 1991a, 1994a, in press), relatively little emphasis has been placed on attempting to understand or explain the power and influence relationships which underscore policy change (Jones, 1994b). This paper represents an attempt by the author to contribute to our understanding of the politics of policy change in Canadian higher education by reporting the findings of a national survey of institution-level student organizations.

This study utilizes the pluralist paradigm of political science and employs a basic model of political activity in terms of policy communities (Pross, 1986). Simply stated, the paradigm uses individual interests as the basic unit of analysis and assumes that individuals will act and join groups in order to further or protect their interests. Policy decisions are made within policy communities composed of the attentive public (a collection of individuals and groups that monitor and attempt to influence policy) and the sub-government (which includes the policy agency and those individuals and groups which have the

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organizational capacity and political legitimacy to have an ongoing influence on policy decisions).

A pressure group is defined as "an organization whose members act together to influence public policy in order to promote their common interest" (Pross, 1986, p. 11) and pressure groups can be differentiated from other types of groups by applying five basic criteria or tests: organization, a desire for influence, membership, common interest, and substantial autonomy in the use of resources. Pressure groups can also be categorized according to their functional and organizational characteristics.

Student Pressure

As Axelrod and others have noted, student activism existed long before the "sixties generation" and the student demonstrations and other political activities that are now commonly associated with that period (Axelrod, 1990; de Conde, 1971). While student activism can be traced back to the early history of higher education, it was not until the 1960s that something resembling a concentrated effort to study and explain student activism can be found within the scholarly literature (Altbach, 1967; Bereday, 1967; de Conde, 1971; Lipset, 1967, 1968; McGuidan, 1968). Except for historical studies (e.g., Kostash, 1980), student activism in the United States and Canada received relatively little attention during the period from the mid-1970s until the mid-1980s when some attention was given by American scholars to student activism during the Reagan presidency (Altbach & Cohen, 1990). While there is a body of literature on student activism, most of this work focuses on these activities as a sociological phenomenon. Considerable emphasis has been placed on exploring the broad social, economic, and political issues underscoring the development of what are often referred to as "student movements" or "generations." Relatively little attention has been given to the structural and organizational characteristics of these movements or generations, and even less has been given to the day-to-day political activities and objectives of student organizations.

It is clear, however, that student organizations have, from time to time, played an active role in terms of attempting to influence institutional, provincial government, and federal government policies in Canada. It is also clear that the level of student participation in institutional decision-making changed dramatically following the reform of university governance structures in the 1960s and early 1970s (Cameron, 1991; Jones, 1992). There were no student members on university governing boards in 1955 (Rowat, 1955) but 78% of universities reported that there were student members on their boards by 1975 (Houwing & Kristjanson, 1975). The proportion of student members on university senates, based on aggregate data, increased from less than 1% of total membership of senates in 1965 to 14% in 1975 (Houwing & Kristjanson, 1975; Houwing & Michaud, 1972). The basic principles which supported increased
student participation on boards and senates were often extended to support reform at other levels of decision-making. Given that more than two decades have passed since the reform of institutional governance, it is important to take a look at student participation in institutional and provincial politics from the perspective of student organizations. Do these organizations believe that they have influence over institutional or provincial government policies? Do they view lobbying activities as a high priority or have they shifted their emphasis to organizing social activities or providing services to their members?

This study represented an attempt to obtain basic data on the current experience of Canadian student organizations, both in terms of organizational capacity (e.g., membership, fees, staff) and political activity related to institutional and provincial government policy communities (e.g., frequency of contact, perceptions of influence). Since little is known about student organizations in the community college sector, the study was also designed to determine whether there are any significant differences between the organizational capacity and political activities of community college student organizations and university student organizations.

Method

This study is one component of a three-year research program, supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, focusing on policy communities and higher education policy. This component focused on the political activities of student organizations operating at the institutional level, that is, organizations representing all or a specific category of students at a particular university or community college. It should be noted that there are also student pressure groups operating at the national, provincial, and understructure (department/faculty/division) levels of authority, not to mention a plethora of issue-oriented groups, and that these groups were not included in the current study, though provincial-level organizations will be included in another component of the project.

A bilingual questionnaire was sent to every institution-level organization listed in the Canadian Federation of Students' (1992) directory of Canadian student organizations. While the directory is not a complete listing of all relevant organizations, it is clearly the most accurate source of information available. Since student organizations often change executive members in April or May of each year, the questionnaire was distributed in February of 1993. The timing of the study was designed to obtain information from 1992-93 organization officials who had been in office for almost a full year with the assumption that these individuals would have the experience within the organization necessary to provide an accurate report of the political activities of their organization.

Questionnaires were sent to the president or senior official of 238
organizations. The questionnaire included questions related to organizational goals, membership, membership fees, and political activities. A total of 100 questionnaires were returned for a response rate of 42%.

A major limitation of the study is that it focuses on whether student organizations attempt to influence institutional and/or government policies, and additional research is required to determine the degree to which such attempts are, in fact, influential in the policy process. The study represented an attempt to explore process-related activities, rather than an attempt to understand the outcome of these activities. Respondents were asked to assess the influence of their activities, but these responses can only be regarded as the perceptions of interested parties. These perceptions, though, are quite important since they tell us something about the way that student leaders view their role and success in the political arena.

Findings

Respondents were asked to indicate the province in which their educational institution is located and whether the institution awards university-level degrees. Responses were received from organizations in each Canadian province. In terms of response by region, 15% of all respondents were from the Atlantic region, 25% were from Quebec, 36% were from Ontario, and 24% were from Western provinces. Sixty respondents indicated that their educational institution awards university-level degrees while 40 indicated that their institution does not.

1. The student organization

One of the defining characteristics of pressure groups is membership, the notion that individuals belong to the organization. Some pressure groups are widely inclusive in that any individual can become a member, while others are extremely exclusive and place strict controls on membership. In the case of institution-level student organizations, membership is obviously limited to those students who attend the educational institution with which the organization is affiliated. In addition, membership may be further limited to a specific component of the student body. Of the 100 organizations responding to the questionnaire, 46 (46%) indicated that all students who attend the educational institution are members of their organization while 54 (54%) indicated that their membership is limited in some way. In the case of university organizations, membership is commonly limited by program type (undergraduate or graduate) or student status (full-time or part-time) and at some institutions there are two or more organizations which operate at the institution-level of authority. The same is true for community college organizations where membership may be limited by program (credit or non-credit, postsecondary or non-postsecondary).
There were tremendous differences in terms of the size of the membership of the responding organizations. In aggregate terms, the responding organizations represented 534,263 full-time students and 219,211 part-time students.

Almost all (98%) of the respondent organizations charge a membership fee. Calculating average fees, especially for part-time students, is quite difficult since fees are sometimes based on the number of credit hours or courses in which a student is enrolled. In addition, fees often include components which are dedicated to specific projects or activities which are not necessarily under the direct control of the student organization. Respondents reported full-time student membership fees ranging from $7 to $186; the average fee was $58. Respondents reported part-time student membership fees ranging from $1 to $116; the average fee was $24. Total fee income reported by respondents ranged from $2,050 to $2,500,000. The average fee income was $328,342. There were no significant differences between the membership fees charged by university organizations and community college organizations. The total of all fee income collected by the 91 organizations which answered this question was $29,879,107.

Eighty percent of respondents reported that their organization employs paid staff. The number of full-time staff per organization ranged from 0 to 60 while the number of part-time staff per organization ranged from 0 to 700 with one organization reporting that the number of part-time staff was simply "too many to count." On average, student organizations employed 7 full-time staff and 39 part-time staff. In aggregate terms, the 99 organizations responding to this question employed a total of 676 full-time staff and 3,838 part-time staff.

Ninety-one (92%, n=99) respondents indicated that the president or senior official of the organization is elected by the membership. The average turnout for the election of the 1992-93 president was 23% (median = 18%) with university organizations reporting a slightly higher turnout (mean of 25%; median of 21%) than college organizations (mean of 20%; median of 10%). Four respondents indicated that the president was elected or selected by a committee or council and four indicated that the president was selected by some "other" means.

Respondents were asked to indicate the gender and age of the 1992-93 student organization president or senior official. Thirty-one percent of respondents (30) reported that the president was female while 69% (68) reported that their president was male. While a higher percentage of university organizations had female presidents (37% or 22) compared with community college organizations (21% or 8), a chi square analysis reveals that the difference is not statistically significant. The mean age of student organization presidents was 24 years of age. On average, university organization presidents were slightly older (25) compared with community college organization presidents (21).

The questionnaire included the following question: "Student organizations often play a variety of roles and have a variety of goals and objectives. In your opinion, how important is each of these activities in terms of the work of your organization?" Respondents were then asked to rank each of thirteen activities
on a scale from 0 (not important) to 5 (very important). Mean rankings of each activity are presented in Table 1. It is interesting to note that three activities which received the highest mean ranking involved the policies of the educational institution: influencing institutional policy related to the interests of the membership; keeping informed of institutional policies related to the membership; and assisting individual students who are having problems related to the policies of the educational institution. The only two items to receive a mean ranking of 3.5 or lower were providing services to members to assist them with their academic studies (3.36) and attempting to influence federal government policies which relate to the interests of the membership (3.28). It is also interesting to note that there were no significant differences between the mean rankings provided by university (degree) organizations and community college (non-degree) organizations, and that all thirteen items on the list received a mean ranking higher than 3 (moderate importance).

The responses to this question suggest that both university and community college organizations view political activities, especially at the institutional and provincial level, as important in terms of their goals and objectives. Monitoring and influencing the policies of the educational institution is regarded as being more important than a number of other roles that are often associated with student organizations, such as organizing social activities, funding student clubs, or providing services to members.

2. The student organization and the educational institution

A section of the questionnaire focused on the relationship between the student organization and the educational institution. Ninety-one percent of respondents indicated that their organization regularly monitors the policies of the educational institution which relate to the interests of their membership and 100% of respondents reported that their organization attempts to influence educational policies related to its members. Approximately 81% of respondents indicated that representatives of the educational institution regularly ask for advice or assistance on policy matters from representatives of the organization.

Respondents were asked to indicate whether representatives of the student organization sit as members of the major decision-making committees of the educational institution. Approximately 33% of respondents indicated that representatives sit on all of the major decision-making committees; 51% indicated that representatives sit on most, and 13% indicated that representatives sit on some, of the major decision-making committees. Only 3% provided a negative response to the question. Once again, there were no significant differences in the responses provided by university and community college organizations.

Eleven percent of respondents indicated that there were daily meetings or contact between representatives of the student organization and representatives
Table 1  
Average Rating of Organizational Activities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Degree</th>
<th>Non-Degree</th>
<th>All</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Influencing institutional policies</td>
<td>4.67</td>
<td>4.55</td>
<td>4.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monitoring institutional policies</td>
<td>4.55</td>
<td>4.55</td>
<td>4.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helping students through institutional &quot;red-tape&quot;</td>
<td>4.10</td>
<td>4.18</td>
<td>4.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monitoring provincial policies</td>
<td>3.98</td>
<td>3.93</td>
<td>4.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing students with information about the work of the organization</td>
<td>3.68</td>
<td>3.95</td>
<td>3.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizing social activities</td>
<td>3.60</td>
<td>4.08</td>
<td>3.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influencing provincial policies</td>
<td>3.90</td>
<td>3.60</td>
<td>3.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monitoring federal policies</td>
<td>3.57</td>
<td>3.68</td>
<td>3.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Funding student groups or clubs</td>
<td>3.57</td>
<td>3.68</td>
<td>3.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing students with information on institutional policies</td>
<td>3.75</td>
<td>3.38</td>
<td>3.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing students with non-academic services</td>
<td>3.63</td>
<td>3.55</td>
<td>3.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing students with academic services</td>
<td>3.39</td>
<td>3.33</td>
<td>3.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influencing federal policies</td>
<td>3.32</td>
<td>3.23</td>
<td>3.28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

of the educational institution to discuss policy matters. Approximately 48% of respondents indicated that this type of communication takes place one or more times each week, while 37% suggested that contact or meetings occur one or more times each month. Only 4% of respondents suggested that contact occurs less frequently (one or more times each year) and all respondents reported at least some level of contact.

Finally, respondents were asked to assess the extent to which they believed that their organization was able to influence the policies of the educational institution. All of the respondents believed that their organization had an element of influence over educational policies, though 11% indicated that their
organization had "very little influence" and 56% suggested that the organization had only "some influence." Twenty-seven percent of respondents believed that their organization had a "strong influence" on policy while 6% characterized the level of influence as "very strong."

3. The student organization and the provincial government

Another section of the questionnaire focused on the relationship between the student organization and the provincial government. Approximately 87% of respondents reported that their organization regularly monitors the policies of their provincial government which relate to the interests of the organization’s membership. Eighty-five percent of respondents indicated that their organization attempts to influence government policies which relate to the interests of their membership.

In contrast to the relationship between the student organization and the educational institutions, only 15% of respondents reported that representatives of the provincial government regularly ask for advice or assistance from the organization. There also appears to be less frequent contact between the student organization and the provincial government compared to the student organization-educational institution relationship. Only 1 (1%) respondent indicated that there was daily contact between the organization and government representatives while 2% of respondents indicated that contact occurs one or more times per week. Approximately 24% of respondents reported monthly contact while 59% reported that contact occurs one or more times each year. Fourteen percent of respondents indicated that representatives of their organization never meet with or contact representatives of the provincial government.

It is not uncommon for institution-level student organizations to work with other student organizations or interest groups in attempting to influence provincial government policy. Sixty-eight percent of respondents indicated that their organization is a member of a provincial association of student groups. Fifty-seven percent of respondents reported that their organization often works with student organizations at other educational institutions in attempting to influence government policy while 34% "sometimes" work with other student organizations and 9% do not work with other student organizations. Aside from student organizations, 64% indicated that their organization works with other interest groups in the provincial political arena (15% reported that they "often" and 49% reported that they "sometimes" work with other interest groups).

Finally, student organization presidents were asked to assess the degree to which their organization is able to influence provincial government policies. None of the respondents believed that their organization had a "very strong" influence on provincial policy and only 4% reported that their organization has a "strong" influence. The majority of respondents indicated that their
organization had either "some" (36%) or "very little" influence (52%). Eight percent of respondents reported that their organization had "no influence" over provincial government policy. Once again, there were no significant differences between the responses received from university and community college student organizations.

Student Organizations and Higher Education Policy

The study of higher education policy in Canada has tended to focus more on the outputs of the policy development process than on those environmental factors and power and influence relationships which provide inputs to this process. It is my belief that our understanding of the "ends" of higher education policy can only be strengthened if further attention is focussed on the "means" of policy development through the analysis of decision-making structures, policy communities, and political pressure groups.

Student organizations obviously play a role in the development of higher education policy, but it is a role which has received little attention except for media coverage of public exhibitions of student activism. Some might argue that this lack of attention is simply a function of a reduced level of political activity on the part of student leaders compared with their peers of the 1960s and 1970s, but the findings of this study provide little support for that conclusion.

Instead, this study suggests that, beginning with the reforms of university governance in the late 1960s, student organizations have come to play a formal and legitimized role within the decision-making structures of the university. There are now student members on almost all university committees and student leaders are often part of the policy networks that play a central role in shaping university-wide policies. In short, student associations are now part of the formal decision-making structures of the university, and one can argue that the board room has become a more accepted venue for the articulation of student interests than the university quadrangle. As pressure groups become increasingly institutionalized, there are also increasing pressures to work within the boundaries of formal structures rather than moving into the realm of public protest. The fact that the responses from student leaders in both the degree and non-degree sectors were similar suggests that student organizations play a similar role in the community college sector.

The institutionalization of student pressure groups is also aided by the nature of their membership, which serves to provide support for their political legitimacy as representatives of the student body, and their financial and human resources, which provide these organizations with the capacity to expend the time and energy necessary to play an ongoing, active role within institutional decision-making structures. Membership in institution-level student organizations is often automatic in that individuals who register as students at a
particular institution are assigned membership in the relevant organization and pay membership fees to that organization as part of the registration process. In this respect, membership in an institution-level student organization is similar to membership in a registered bargaining unit where fees are collected automatically by the employer on behalf of the union. It is quite different from membership in voluntary, inclusive pressure groups, where membership is a matter of individual choice and is open to anyone willing to pay the relevant fee.

In terms of financial and human resources, the picture of student organizations which emerges from this study is quite different from the stereotypical notion of the student council which struggles to raise funds for a few social events each year. Almost all of the organizations included in this study charge membership fees, and, since many of these organizations have large memberships, fee income can represent a substantial sum of money. The average level of total fee income reported by respondents was over $300,000. In addition, several respondents noted that they have additional sources of income stemming from business or service enterprises operated by the organization. The level of financial and human resources available to these organizations, combined with the automatic or compulsory nature of student membership, suggests an operating environment that would be the envy of many other pressure groups within the Canadian political arena.

Institution-level student organizations also play a role in terms of higher education policy at the provincial level of authority. According to the student leaders participating in this study, monitoring and influencing provincial policy is an important objective of these associations. On the other hand, there seems to be fairly infrequent contact between the association and provincial government officials.

There are several possible reasons for the relatively low level of contact between institution-level associations and provincial governments. Canadian universities have a high level of institutional autonomy (Jones, in press; Skolnik & Jones, 1992) and one might argue that many of the policy issues which have a direct impact on students (such as policies concerning academic programs, libraries, residences, parking, admissions, etc.) are the responsibility of institutional, rather than provincial, decision-making processes. The same may be true for community colleges, though these institutions have less autonomy and are more directly influenced by provincial regulation than universities. Provincial policies, especially those related to the level of operating support provided to institutions, student aid, and, in some provinces, the level of tuition that institutions can charge, are obviously important to university students, but student associations may have decided that their political energies are best expended at the local rather than provincial policy arena.

This low level of contact may also be a function of the fact that many (68%) of these organizations are members of provincial student associations and that a great deal of provincial lobbying activity may be delegated or assigned to these
provincial organizations, a notion that obviously requires further research. While provincial associations may be the major players in terms of student lobbying at the provincial level, it should be noted that these organizations, and the Canadian Federation of Students which operates at the national level, were a major topic raised by respondents as part of the open-ended request for additional comments at the conclusion of the questionnaire. Several respondents made very positive statements concerning the role of the provincial or national association in terms of representing student interests, but many others noted problems with these relationships. Several noted that there were strong disagreements between their institution-level organization and the provincial association, or that there was a schism between two provincial organizations operating in the same jurisdiction. While additional research focusing on the role and function of, and the degree of consensus within, provincial and national student organizations is necessary, it is clear that most of the organizations included in this study had a network of relationships with other student and non-student pressure groups, networks or coalitions which the political science literature suggests can play an important role in terms of the exchange of information and the joining of forces to increase political pressure (see Pross, 1986). These findings certainly suggest that relatively few student organizations work in complete isolation in terms of their political activities at the provincial level.

Finally, this low level of contact may be linked to the perception of student leaders that these associations simply have little influence over government policy. In other words, the leadership may believe that lobbying government is an important objective of these associations, but prior experience suggests that there will be few benefits associated with doing anything more than a very basic level of lobbying activity within the provincial policy community.

The study provides some indication of the level of influence that student leaders believe their associations have on policy decisions, though it is extremely important to recognize both the limitations of this data and the limitations associated with any attempt to quantify political influence. It is often difficult, if not impossible, to establish causal relationships in terms of political activity because various participants may have very different perceptions of what took place. Ten individuals sitting at a board table may make a common decision, but each of those ten individuals may have a different view as to why the decision was made. Student association presidents are probably in the best position to have a general, overall understanding of the influence of the organization and its representatives on the political process, but it is important to recognize that other participants in the process may have quite different perceptions. It is also important to recognize that the perceptions of one student leader may not be shared by other student leaders working in the same organization. More research is obviously required before one can speculate on the ways in which faculty, administrators, support staff, and government officials perceive the importance
of student associations and their influence on the political process. It is also important to study student associations in more detail in order to understand the perceptions of others who work within these organizations and to gain a clearer appreciation of the relationship between the association, the educational institution, and government.

Notes

1. The Canadian Federation of Students' directory includes organizations that are not members of the Federation.

2. From this point on, I will refer to organizations associated with degree granting institutions as "university organizations" and those affiliated with non-degree institutions as "community college organizations." It should be noted that the latter includes a wide range of postsecondary, non-university institutions such as the Quebec CEGEPS, the Ontario Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology, and the British Columbia and Alberta junior colleges. Note that after this study was conducted, the Government of British Columbia extended the range of institutions with the ability to offer degree programs, including university colleges and several other institutions.

3. At the University of Toronto, for example, students are members of one of three organizations (Jones, 1991b). All graduate students are members of the Graduate Student Association, full-time undergraduate students are members of the Students Administrative Council, and part-time undergraduate students are members of the Association of Part-time Undergraduate Students.

4. Two community college organizations reported that they do not charge a membership fee.

5. One organization reported that it has two senior officials: one male and one female.

6. It is important to recognize that there are several important influences that may explain this phenomenon. Becoming a formal participant in a decision-making process involves an element of co-option. The participant becomes more aware of competing interests and viewpoints, the complexities of the policy process, and usually has access to more data than those outside the formal process. Institutionalized pressure groups must also weigh the potential benefits associated with moving outside the decision-making structure in order to "win" a particular policy battle with the potential disadvantages that may stem from a loss of ongoing influence and prestige within these formal decision-making structures.
References


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