UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT GOVERNMENT PARTICIPANT DECISION-MAKING AT A CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY: AN INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

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Sara Long Gallegos

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ABSTRACT
The purpose of this interpretative phenomenological analysis study was to explore how undergraduate student government participants at a state university in California engage in decision-making in their official roles. This study focused on an auxiliary student government organization called Associated Students located at one of the twenty-three campuses in the California State University System. The perceptions and experiences of five student participants in this organization were explored. The findings produced four superordinate themes. The first theme, Student Representation, revealed the participants’ purpose of their role and how it impacted their approach to decision-making. The second theme, Experience in Role, contributed to the participants’ perceived ability and understanding of the decision-making process. The third theme, Approach to Decision-Making, provided context about how the participants’ own perspectives and various influences on their perspectives affected their decision-making. The final theme, Importance of Reflection, explained how the participants made sense of their role as a decision-maker through increased awareness of their actions and thoughts in the decision-making process. This study affirms the need for intentional training for student government participants to learn about their role responsibilities, specific expectations of their role and the authority they have within their role. Additionally, pertinent information sharing should begin early in the student’s role and presented multiple times in preparation to make an informed decision. This study also discovered that the importance of guided reflection should be part of a student government participant’s responsibilities. Guided reflection serves as an accountability measure for the student and an outlet to think more intentionally about their role, and the decisions they make as a student government participant.

Keywords: student government, decision-making, reflective learning, guided reflection
DEDICATION

To Tom, my partner and friend. Your care, frustrations and sympathies also made this happen. To quote Mr. Paul Blake, “You’re hurt. You’re tired. You’re bleeding. I’m gonna make you a promise. We get into that end zone, you’re not gonna feel any pain.”
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Chapter One: Introduction to the Study

The purpose of this interpretative phenomenological analysis study was to explore how undergraduate student government participants at a state university in California engage in decision-making in their official roles. Undergraduate student government associations in the California State University System serve as the formal student voice. These groups have legitimate power conferred upon them by the state and their home institution to participate in institutional decision-making on behalf of student interests (Klemenčič, 2014). Participants of these student governments serve and vote on various decision-making groups within their institution (Miles, 2011). They are responsible for high-level decisions that affect many stakeholders within their university.

Study Context and Background

Undergraduate student governance. Student governments in American higher education at the state level are well-established student organizations that have multiple functions. The general roles student governance plays in the United States are to serve as the official voice of the student body, represent the students in decision-making processes in university governance, collect and disseminate student activity fees, and provide student organization and student activity support and advocacy (Laosebikan-Buggs, 2006). The responsibilities of student governance in the California State University System are to follow the delegated powers and authorities bestowed upon them from the Board of Trustees, their home institution and their organizational constitution (Mackey, 2006). In the United States, the levels of delegated powers of representation and decision-making made in university governance vary among institution type and from state to state.
Representational structures. Within higher education, the relationship of student governing bodies to their home institution fit within multiple models that exist on a continuum of progressive involvement and autonomy from the home institution. The frameworks presented from literature refer to general college and university student government structures. *Figure 1* provides an illustration of the three models of undergraduate student government.

*Figure 1*, Student government model relationship to home institution: Created from findings by Cuyjet (1994); Klemenčič (2014); Miller & Nadler (2006).

Model 1 shows a student governing body formally recognized by the institution, serves as the overseer of student activities, and gives student perspective in minimal meetings with faculty and administration (Cuyjet, 1994; Klemenčič, 2014). In this model, the level of autonomy is low, and the level of involvement falls within a degree of student tokenism (Klemenčič, 2014; Miller & Nadler, 2006).
The Model 2 framework is where student governments are involved with other campus stakeholders to serve in a consulting role on behalf of students. The students’ roles range from voting rights on specific groups to “largely ceremonial posts without a vote or real voice” (Cuyjet, 1994, p. 74; Klemenčič, 2014). The level of autonomy from the institution in Model 2 is in the middle of the spectrum, meaning the level of involvement within the institution ranges within degrees of student tokenism to degrees of student decision-making power (Klemenčič, 2014; Miller & Nadler, 2006).

Model 3 shows student governments operating a separate, autonomous governing body granted with institutional decision-making rights (Cuyjet, 1994; Klemenčič, 2014). This model has a high level of autonomy and allows for degrees of student decision-making power (Klemenčič, 2014; Miller & Nadler, 2006). The more autonomous a student governing group is from their home institution in policy, legal independence, and operational funding, the higher degree of student power they will have to be key decision makers at the institutional level (Klemenčič, 2014; Miller & Nadler, 2006). There are not any student government models that have been shown in research findings to have complete autonomy from the home institution and equal power of involvement in institutional decision-making.

Research Problem

The purpose of this interpretative phenomenological analysis study was to explore how undergraduate student government participants at a state university in California engage in decision-making in their official roles. Recent literature on student government is limited, particularly surrounding the decision-making process of student participants. Exploration of how student government participants understand how they make decisions will provide further insight into this influential group in higher education institutions.
Rationale for study. The rationale for the study was to gain understanding of how student government participants make decisions in official meetings. Knowledge of the thought processes that go into decision-making will benefit student government advisors. The study shed light on how the students see themselves in their official roles when faced with decisions that carry varying degrees of importance. Recent trends with faculty and institutional administration throughout the United States have been to restrict or eliminate student government from decision-making –citing immaturity, limited self-interest, and short-term investment (Miles, Miller, & Nadler, 2008). If the main purpose of student government is to serve as the students’ voice as a stakeholder of an institution, taking away their voice because of immaturity in decision-making does not serve anyone well and does not align with the philosophies of shared governance. Ideally, practices of shared governance would provide meaningful ways for student government groups to contribute to the power of decisions within the institution (Miller & Nadler, 2006).

Significance of study. Understanding how student government participants make decisions is beneficial to many parties within and beyond higher education. In institutions with significant student voice, types of decisions that must be made by these groups of students range from what events to coordinate for the student body, to sitting on a faculty affairs committee helping decide what courses to add to a curriculum (Kuh & Lund, 1994). The impact of student government decisions affects a wide range of individuals and groups as the students are providing “meaningful input to the administration” (Kennedy, Ginsburg, Harnois, & Spooner, 2015, p. 4).

Student government representatives often have a say on committees determining outcomes of issues that have a direct impact on all students. Examples of issues impacted are
tuition and fees, budget cuts and class availability, parking concerns, and smoke-free campus implementation (Keppler & Robinson, 1993). In addition to these issues that affect the student body, decisions made by student government participants can also affect the whole institution. Real decisions made by student government participants “have a direct impact on their campus environments” (Wooten, Hunt, LeDuc, & Poskus, 2012, p. 53).

Additionally, students and higher education professionals are affected by decisions made by student government participants at the local and state level. Student government representatives are invited to sit on town councils and neighborhood committees to provide the institution’s student perspective, fostering good relationships between the community and the institution. At the state level, student representatives from student governing bodies come together to serve as a state student association. An example of this is the California State Student Association. This group of students makes decisions that affect the entire California State University System. An example of these decisions was a resolution this group passed to support proposed amendments to the CSU System Sustainability Practices Policy affecting each campus (California State Student Association, 2014). The resolution was then presented to the Board of Trustees for support of the amendment to the policy. Additionally, this group advocates and lobbies for legislation on behalf of students at the state government level.

Students who participate in student governance have influence at the national and global level. There are national student organizations, such as the United States Student Association that work with student governments all over the United States to promote and enhance student activism and consistently meet with national legislators. On the global level, American student governments can influence how other countries’ student governments operate and interact with their institutions. Actions taken by student governments in the United States can serve as a
model of democratic practices for other student governments around the world (Klemenčič, 2014).

For individuals or groups who work directly with student government participants, it is important to know how students make decisions. At some institutions, student government representatives have a seat on their institution’s Board of Trustees. Students in these positions help make decisions with the Board of Trustees, such as approving educational policies, financial management of the institution, and hiring the institution’s president (Beeny, Garvey-Nix, Rhodes, & Terrell, 2008). Administrators who work directly with student government participants consult and decide on a multitude of issues. Students in these positions help make decisions with the administration on many policies for the institution. The students also serve as a critical support body in difficult times. Examples of areas where student government helps the institution with issues of difficulty are advocating for budget line items, assisting with tragedies on campus, and helping support governance actions (Moore, 1995). Similarly, faculty members work with student government participants to determine policies affecting academics, such as faculty course load, course offerings, and graduation requirements. All the groups performing duties of institutional governance are affected by the decision-making process of student government participants.

Student government advisors are affected by the decisions made by student government participants. As individuals who work most closely with these students, advisors are in a position to give guidance to student participants to make decisions. There is a balance that must be maintained in order to be the provider of information to students, but not sway or tell them what decisions to make. “Students rely on student government advisors” for information, feedback, allowance for failure, and support (Miles, 2011, p. 325).
As illustrated, student government participants in the United States make many decisions impacting diverse individuals and groups. The intent to study this particular groups’ decision-making process is critical for inclusion of student government into institutional governance.

**Research question.** How do undergraduate student government participants at a state university make sense of the decision-making process they undergo in official meetings?

**Guiding Theoretical Framework**

**Logic of appropriateness.** The framework guiding this study was the logic of appropriateness by James G. March (1994). The logic of appropriateness gives a perspective of interpreting human action when faced with a decision (March, & Olsen, 2013). The decisions made by an individual are a result of asking themselves the question, “What does a person like me (identity) do (rules) in a situation like this (recognition)?” (Weber, Kopelman, & Messick, 2004).

The three main elements of this framework are identity, recognition of situation, and rules. When decision-makers face the need for action, they ask themselves several questions to arrive at a decision: “What kind of situation is this? What kind of person am I? What kind of organization is this? What does a person like me or an organization like this do in a situation like this?” (March, 1994, p. 58). In 1994, March described these questions as a reasoning process where a person establishes their identities and matches the rules of the situation to act appropriately. It is important to understand what is meant by each of the main elements of this framework and how they contribute to appropriate action.

**Identity.** The term identity within the logic of appropriateness framework is used broadly and interchangeably with the term role. The role or identity of the individual is seen as fitting in a framework or prototype of a certain group (Weber et al., 2004). Examples of this are a student
who is on the baseball team, or the president of the Associated Students. The traits, as well as the duties and obligations an individual perceives as being within their role or identity is how they see themselves fitting in different situations (Weber et al., 2004).

Several factors go into identity development, one of which is learning how to act and speak in particular ways. March (1994) described the concept of identity being either individualized or socialized. Those who fall within an individualization of identity within a group will see themselves as unique and independent, self-imposing standards, and self-selecting their rules and roles (March, 1994). Individuals who establish their identity through socialization of a group learn the appropriate rules for understanding situations and how to react. The actions performed by those who were socialized will be learned obligations and responsibilities (March, 1994). It is important to note the individuals belong to a multitude of identities and each situation of how they see their identity within a group will vary by group.

**Recognition of situation.** For an individual to respond to an action, they must understand the situation, their identity, and the rules of identities and organizations. Defining the situation is the centerpiece of learning what the identities of the individual or group are in order to inform the decision made. The individual evaluates the situation by observing the details of a situation and matching them to other situations they may have already encountered (Weber, Kopelman, & Messick, 2004). How an individual interprets a situation varies from person to person (Sending, 2002). Different ways of discerning lessons of past experiences, coping and also resolving those experiences is how an individual translates the situation (March, & Olsen, 2013). The experience from past decisions informs how the rule of the decision is viewed and leads to the interpretation of the current situation. Those who have not encountered a situation similar to the present experience will refer to rules of the organization or identity to act (March, 1994).
**Rules.** Rules permeate our society governing how we should behave, talk, and act. Individuals and organizations have rules around identity and situations. The rules simplify choices made in decisions by narrowing options (Weber, Kopelman, & Messick, 2004). Individuals belonging to organizations and groups act according to the rules of the appropriate response to situations by evoking identity (Sending, 2002). March (1994) explained the presentation of all parts of an individual’s identity do not exist at the same time. There are different environments and relationships surrounding the attitudes and behaviors of the individual and others within a situation (March, 1994).

Organizations and groups such as Associated Students provide a framework of rules for how individual actors will behave, as well as the organization itself (March, & Olsen, 2013). An example of organization rules is the mission statement that acts as a guiding principle. The rules regarded as best practices and operating procedures exist as fact or stable familiarity (March, & Olsen, 2013). The outlined rules for the organization make decision-making easier when faced with a situation. However, there are times when the rules of an organization or group may not be standard or automatic with regard to handle some situations (March, 1994; March, & Olsen, 2013). If there are situations where rules are ambiguous or incomprehensible, the decision-maker may not follow the rule, or further, may change the rule (March, 1994). Nonetheless, the rules provided act as a guide rather than dictating a decision where the individuals can accommodate or shift their behaviors without changing the structures or core rules of the organization (March, & Olsen, 2013).

**Framework representation.** Figure 2 provides further illustration of the logic of appropriateness framework. This framework representation illustrates how the decision maker
views the situation created by the interaction between situational cues and identity (Weber, Kopelman, & Messick, 2004).

![Diagram of Logic of Appropriateness Framework]

*Figure 2.* Schematic representation of the logic of appropriateness framework. Adapted from Weber, Kopelman, and Messick (2004).

**Critiques of logic of appropriateness.** The logic of appropriateness framework is not without criticism. Critics of the logic of appropriateness view this framework as an escape route – where following rules does not require thinking (March, 1994; Sending, 2002). The assertion is that rules creating obligations reduces independent thought by not leaving room for choice (March, 1994). Critics say the reasons why an individual follows a rule are not fully explained in the logic of appropriateness, other than an explanation that the individual is fulfilling obligations demanded from the defined identity of the decision-maker (Sending, 2002). In other words, logic of appropriateness is criticized for not leaving room for deviation from change (Müller, 2004).

Response to this critique in the literature espouses that rules are not impossible to change (March & Olsen, 2013; Müller, 2004). Rules change through exposure to experiences and
contact with others. Relationships and the weight of the situation can lead to a transformation of rule-following (March & Olsen, 2013; Müller, 2004). Decision-making behavior changes as the rules change to fit the encountered situation (March, 1994).

The logic of appropriateness is not the most dominant school of thought in decision-making frameworks (Powell & Greenhaus, 2012), whereas logic of consequence is. The theory behind logic of consequence is that the decision-maker uses reason to evaluate alternatives in relation to preferences and expectations (March, 1994; Weber, Kopelman, & Messick, 2004). March (1994) addressed the differences between the two logic frameworks. He stated that both are logics and logics of reason. The logic of consequence “encourages thought, discussion, and personal judgment about preferences and expectations” (March, 1994, p. 101). The demands of the logic of consequence on the individual and organization are “to anticipate the future and form useful preferences” (March, 1994, p. 101). The logic of appropriateness “encourages thought, discussion, and personal judgment about situations, identities, and rules” (March, 1994, p.101). The demands on the abilities of the individual and organizations in the logic of appropriateness are “to learn from the past and to form useful identities” (March, 1994, p. 101). The differences between the two logic frameworks are the demand on the ability of the individual and the organization, and not on the thoughtful decision made (March, 1994).

**Rationale for using the logic of appropriateness framework.** The value of using the logic of appropriateness framework for this study stems from the students participating – they are members of Associated Students, an organization with established rules. “Organizations shape individual action both by providing the content of identities and rules and by providing appropriate cues for invoking them” (March, 1994, p. 71). The students who are members of Associated Students already have a “stable collection of rules and practices” making the ease of
decision-making possible (March, & Olsen, 2013, p. 3). The roles the students hold and the governing documents of Associated Students have prescribed rules. These rules provide parameters and norms, which help the students arrive at a decision.

It is the identities that the students bring with them to their roles that can result in conflict or ambiguity with regard to how to interpret a situation. Students may struggle with a decision tied to identities when faced with situations that do not have an automatic or prescribed rule from the organization (March, & Olsen, 2013). These students are also part of an organization that has an identity. The purpose and operations of Associated Students is to serve the student body and the university as an auxiliary organization. The rules of the organization do not necessarily predict the behavior of action because the situation, identities, and rules can be ambiguous (March, 1994). The rules will define the starting point from which the student will recognize the situation, clarify their identity, and search and recall appropriate rules to the situation in order to make a decision (March, 1994).

**Applying logic of appropriateness to the study.** Students who are members of Associated Students accept organizational and meeting rules; thus, the influence of rules is evident and important when making a decision. This underlying concept of rules within decision-making was used as the background and guided question formation when interviewing student participants for data collection. In addition, the identities evoked by the student participant during the decision-making process was also used as a guide during data collection. This corresponds with an interpretative phenomenological analysis methodology. This type of qualitative research approach is used to engage with participants to learn about their experience with a central phenomenon.
Definition of Key Terminology

1. **Student Government**: An established self-governing student organization that is the official voice of the student body with the university administration and faculty (Miller & Nadler, 2006).

2. **Auxiliary organization**: An organization that is representing and using the name of the university to provide instructional and service aids that are not normally furnished by the state budget to allow the campus to carry on activities (California Code of Regulations, Title 5, Section 42400).

3. **Board of Directors**: The elected student governing body over the non-profit auxiliary organization within the California State University System. A representative of the campus president serves to advise on policy and serves as a liaison between the governing board and the president of the campus (California Code of Regulations, Title 5, Section 42602).

4. **Official Meeting**: An official meeting where the mandated majority of the Board of Directors congregate to hear, discuss, or deliberate any item that is within the jurisdiction of the Board of Directors. The official meeting must comply with the Gloria Romero Open Meetings Act of 2000.

5. **Meeting agenda**: The official meeting agenda must comply with the Gloria Romero Open Meetings Act of 2000. Guidelines include posting the agenda within the designated time before the meeting with a description of items to be discussed or deliberated.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

Participation in student government in American higher education has many benefits to the student and the institution. Students who are involved in student government learn leadership skills and gain satisfaction in their college experience (Downey, Bosco, & Silver, 1984; Kuh & Lund, 1994). Students who take part in institutional decision-making serve as a “system of checks and balances with administrators and faculty” (Love & Miller, 2003, p. 533). By taking advantage of its legal right to serve as the voice of the student body, the student government can advise and challenge institutional administrators, faculty and Board of Trustees. The purpose of this interpretative phenomenological analysis study was to explore how undergraduate student government participants at a state university engage in the decision-making process within their official roles.

The information reviewed herein, aiming to address the problem statement, was presented in three streams. The first stream of the literature review focused on the historical evolution of student government and participation in institutional governance within the United States. The progression identified important milestones of student involvement in shared governance throughout the history of American higher education. The second stream explored current understanding of undergraduate participation in student government as it pertains to student development and involvement, and the benefits of student participation. Additionally, this stream demonstrated and explored the dual roles authority figures serve as educators and influencers in their relationships with student participants. The last stream discussed student government decision-making, with particular focus on the types and breadth of decisions of the student government participants. This final stream also explored the various perceptions of
student government among administrators, faculty and students. A synthesis of the findings, broadly and specifically, is presented in the conclusion section.

**Historical Overview of the Evolution of Student Government**

Student self-governance has been present from the early days of American higher education (Harris & Dyer, 2006; May, 2010; Schlesinger & Balridge, 1982). With the growth of the nation and the growth of higher education in size and number of colleges, the development of student government progressed from non-existent participation in university governance to voting membership on boards of trustees (Alexander, 1969; Davis, 2006; Miles, Miller, & Nadler, 2008). Historical examples presented highlight important milestones of self-governance and changing influence in institutional governance. Substantial among those milestones presented was institutional, faculty and community support for student participation in institutional governance. Failures and successes that occurred once the students became members of institutional governance are discussed, as well.

**Milestones in student governance.** In the Colonial period of higher education, students were dissatisfied because they wanted to have control over their lives. This sparked the organization of groups, formed outside the classroom (May, 2010). Organization came in response to the method of institutional control era known as *in loco parentis*, or “in place of the parent”. The approach higher education institutions assumed was to set “character-building rules” on students (Lee, 2011, p. 67). Students wanted the freedom to engage socially and educationally; therefore, the formation of student groups began. The first example is the literary society.

Literary societies were the first organized self-governed student groups, forming in the early to mid-1700s (Harris & Dyer, 2006; May, 2010; Thelin, 2011). The assemblage of
students in these groups started the unified student voice to communicate with college administration, helping establish honor systems and libraries (May, 2010). These self-governed groups provided an outlet for students to deliver services to the student body that the institution could not or would not provide (Harris & Dyer, 2006). May (2010) describes literary societies as “filling a vacuum left by the inadequate resources of the college while satisfying the needs of students” (p. 209).

By the 1830s, increases in student enrollment at colleges and universities led to the declining effectiveness of literary societies (Harris & Dyer, 2006; May, 2010). Along with the growth of enrollment came the formation of class rank, leading to class pride and allegiance. Students were loyal to their class rank, which resulted in the formation of the class council. The class council was the new organized form of student government, first appearing in the late 1800s (May, 2010; Rudolph, 1990; Thelin, 2011).

The era of the class council shaped the way for modern student government structures, in which representatives were elected by their classmates. The representatives assumed the role of managing extra-curricular activities, sitting on honor and disciplinary committees, and meeting with college administration (May, 2010). After that period, student interests changed to other activities, and the class council became a less popular way to be involved (May, 2010). Nonetheless, the structure was in place for student council, and the third form of student government began to emerge in the early 1900s (May, 2010; Rudolph, 1990).

The student government organizations most resembling present-day student government formed between 1908 and 1920 (Golden & Schwartz, 1994; Sorber & Humphrey, 2011). In this class council system, there was limited influence of voice from the student government on the decision-making of the administration. The councils were only recognized to oversee student
activities and adjudication of other students (May, 2010; Sorber & Humphrey, 2011). A milestone for students to have influence over outcomes in institutional policy was the formation of *The Harvard Redbook* in 1925.

*The Harvard Redbook* was a student initiated reform of general educational practice for undergraduates to engage with knowledge from the humanities, social and natural sciences to address the need for career preparation (Sorber & Humphrey, 2011). The Harvard Student Council formed a committee to explore the educational theory and practices of Harvard (Sorber & Humphrey, 2011). The student council established bureaucratic positions for students which led to gaining power and privilege to interact with university faculty and administration (Sorber & Humphrey, 2011). The students holding these established positions were not viewed as self-advocating students, the positions were regarded as official within a hierarchy of a bureaucratic system (Sorber & Humphrey, 2011). After two decades of diligent work on behalf of the student council, and increased influence of voice with university administration, *The Harvard Redbook* of 1945 was published (Sorber & Humphrey, 2011). The outcome of the work was general education curriculum reform, adopted by institutions across the nation. The work Harvard students did on the *Harvard Redbook* paved the way for student government to work with administration and faculty on issues other than extra-curricular activities. As students built upon efforts from previous students holding their student council position, that system helped develop student competency in university governance which “resulted in new institutional responsibilities, increasing students’ indispensability to the management of the system, and enhancing student power” (Sorber & Humphrey, 2011, p. 20). Having a voice and wielding influence in institutional policy was an important milestone in student government history.
Support for student self-governance. From the mid-1920s to the early 1970s, support for students to have a voice in their lives surfaced. Younger (1931) argued, students were working their way through school and were “treated as men in their work, but as boys in their student activities” (p. 205). That treatment of students contrasted with the industry of the time, where paternalism had disappeared altogether (Younger, 1931). A study conducted by Peterson (1943) highlighted student government models that had satisfactory relationships with faculty and administration. Data indicated greater student, faculty, and administrative satisfaction in relationships when the control of responsibilities was given to the students, such as the honor system, extra-curricular activities, student self-governance, and a student body manager hired by the students. Peterson (1943) urged other institutions to use the data for support and improvements of existing student government structures and relationships, ensuring “government of the students, by the students, for the students shall not perish from institutions of higher learning” (p. 208).

In the 1960s, faculty were the primary advocate for student self-governance. In 1968 the Joint Statement on Rights and Freedoms of Students was released by The American Association of University Professors, the Association of American Colleges, the U.S. National Student Association, the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, and the National Association of Women Deans and Counselors (Joughin, 1968; Joint Statement on Rights and Freedoms of Students, 1968). The Joint Statement encouraged student input regarding multiple areas: access to higher education, classroom evaluation, student record confidentiality, freedom of association, freedom of inquiry and expression, student participation in institutional government, student publication, off-campus liberties, and disciplinary procedures (Joint
Statement on Rights and Freedoms of Students, 1968). That document and the advocacy of faculty and staff helped pave the way for a stronger student voice in institutional government.

A further argument for student voice was the use of informed judgment by the student, that it should be allowed to inform regulations regarding curriculum, class sizes, hours of meetings, and in particular, evaluation of teachers (Joughin, 1968). Additionally, Joughin (1968) commented, the private life of students outside of the college should not be full of distrust, and the practice of in loco parentis management by the university were “rules more suited to a kiddies’ sandbox than to a gathering of vigorous and intelligent young people of high aptitude and recognized promise” (Joughin, 1968, p. 11).

The last example of the power of faculty support came with an in-depth study in 1970 weighing the arguments for and against student participation in institutional government. Arguments against student participation stated that the power structure would shift towards the firm ultimatums of student activists, the immaturity of limited life experience, high turnover, overemphasis of immediate concerns, and the overall time constraints faced by student responsibilities (McGrath, 1970). McGrath (1970) ultimately sided in favor of student participation in shared governance. He voiced that in order for educational material to be relevant and current, students are the most suited to have input (McGrath, 1970). McGrath (1970) also rejected the concept that students are too immature to make informed decisions, arguing if they are being asked to study and understand the classics, they are mature enough to have a voice.

**Students have the voice, now what?** For student government to have a powerful, effective voice, it must have authority to represent their constituents’ concerns (Alexander, 1969). In 1972, the United States Congress made amendments to the Education Act urging
higher education governing boards to consider student participation on governing councils (Schlesinger & Baldridge, 1982). The formal power and authority granted to student governments in the 1970s resulted in the development of new kinds of problems. For instance, how were the student governments going to handle the powers bestowed upon them? Students quickly learned the bureaucratic nature of institutional governance took time, and faculty voice would overpower their own (Schlesinger & Baldridge, 1982). As a result of perceived student inadequacy, main decisions would typically occur within small groups of administrators (Schlesinger & Baldridge, 1982). Due to feelings of inadequacy, students became withdrawn from decision-making processes (Schlesinger & Baldridge, 1982). In the early 1980s, as student involvement declined, the outlook on student participation in institutional governance became bleak (Ratsoy & Bing, 1999).

The student activist practices from the 1960s subsided. Student governments took on an additional role, taking advantage of inclusion in institutional governance. From the 1980s to the 1990s, the administrative contribution approach to student government work changed to that of leadership development of student participants (Chambers & Phelps, 1994). University administrators evolved the work with student government groups into experiential learning (Kuh & Lund, 1994; Miles, 2011). Institutions focused on providing guidance and a supportive environment in which students could learn about the democratic process, resulting in student governments learning how to better exercise their granted authority (Remley & Ruby, 1993).

**Conclusion of historical overview.** Participation in institutional governance by students has been lengthy and continues to evolve. From student powerlessness to establishing oversight of student activities, to having a voting seat on a Board of Trustees, student government has achieved a strong presence in higher education. With continued support from faculty, staff, and
administration, student government can continue to improve its importance and effectiveness in regard to participation in institutional governance.

**Present Day Student Government Participation**

Examining student government participation through the lens of student development theories helps to gain insight into skill development, learning experiences, and social and emotional development. When a student is involved in extracurricular activities, including student government, the student experiences a greater amount of learning and personal development (Astin, 1999). “The more engaged a student is, the better the opportunity for a learning experience” (Manns, 2006, p. 97). Involvement in student government also contributes to higher student retention by creating a sense of connection to the home institution, greater confidence, and better overall performance (Bray, 2006). Stream two of the literature review focused on the involvement of students in student government by examining student learning experience, and benefits to the student and institutions. It also focused on the relationships students in these positions have with authority figures in their roles.

**Student involvement.** A recurring theme within the literature about student government participation in university governance is the focus of leadership development. The current research centers on the skills and experiences gained by students who participate in student government. These skills are evident in practical competence where improved decision-making and organizational skills take place (Kuh & Lund, 1994). Additional skill-building outcomes affect social competence, resulting in increased ability of the students learning to work with others (Kuh & Lund, 1994).

**Importance of participating.** When a student participates in student government, growth and development take place in multiple skill-building areas, such as time management, social
awareness, and critical thinking (Kuh & Lund, 1994). Institutions gain student perspectives on current issues from students who are willing to partner with them, thus giving the university an advantage in serving their student constituents (Miles, 2011). This section discusses the learning that takes place when students participate in student governance and the benefits to the institution.

*Student learning.* First, it is important to treat students in governance “as an extension of the educational mission, not a political structure” so the student should learn from the overall experience (Moore, 1995, p. 203). These students are not experts in self-governance or institutional governance, but are in an educational environment to learn how these things work. When students engage in governance content, they gain greater insight into the inner workings of the systems and processes required for the functioning of their campus (Wooten, Hunt, LeDuc & Poskus, 2012). This engagement is an opportunity for students to learn how leaders make decisions in groups affecting how things operate within the institution. Students learn about democracy and politics by taking part in self-governance. This results in an increase in civic-mindedness and exposure to humanitarian values (Bambenek & Sifton, 2003; Bray, 2006; Miller & Nadler, 2006; Moore, 1995; Portnykh, 2001). Students who take on leadership roles in student government want to make change for the better, benefiting their student constituents (Miles, 2011). Serving as the primary conduit for student voice within the institution affords student government participants the opportunity to empower students, a group not historically powerful (Lizzio & Wilson, 2009; Miles et al., 2008).

While these students are learning how to navigate the political structure, they are also gaining personal skills (Lizzio & Wilson, 2009). They are learning how to work with others in different situations, particularly when there is discourse in decision-making. Skills that come
from this are consensus-building, conflict resolution, compromise, and general communication (Bray, 2006; Miller & Nadler, 2006; Kuh & Lund, 1994). Students learn from their mistakes, as well as from peers who came before them (Miles, 2011). Additionally, students learn how to demonstrate maturity and self-discipline, while also learning how to differentiate separating personal lives from their professional lives (Hilliard, 2010; Miles, 2010). The learning associated with participating in co-curricular activities, such as student government, has been found to be high, increasing the student’s overall satisfaction with their college experience (Downey, 1984). Engagement in any co-curricular activity enhances a student’s personal and professional development. Furthermore, student leaders perform a service to their fellow students, and the benefit from the added value of contributing to their college community (Lizzio & Wilson, 2009).

**Benefits to the institution.** Institutions benefit from students participating in student government in multiple ways. First, institutions invest time in developing student skills to provide learning opportunities, thus advancing their educational goals. Providing education about decision-making and advocacy is beneficial for higher education as a whole because the accountability of the institution is higher with competent representation of the diverse needs of the student body (Love & Miller, 2003; Miles et al., 2008; Miles, 2011).

Second, given the student body is a major stakeholder of an institution, the student government represents their best interests (Luescher-Mamashela, 2013). Student government participants serve the school by providing current and relevant information about student constituents (Klemenčič, 2014). The institutions benefit from having a form of an early warning system providing insight into student issues, allowing the school to better prepare for situations
that may arise (Lizzio & Wilson, 2009). Also, the student government can help in times of crisis, bringing student support when most needed (Moore, 1995).

Student government provides a system of checks and balances to institutional decision-making (Love & Miller, 2003). The student perspective is important to include in institutional decision-making, as students are major stakeholders (Luescher-Mamashela, 2013). If the student government was not present to advance a student-centered agenda, challenge, and inform administrators and faculty of student concerns, the democratic process could be weakened and hinder the educational effectiveness of the institution.

**Relationships with authority figures.** Staff, administrators, and faculty working with students involved in student governance can take what is learned about student development to help guide students in the participation of institutional decision-making. Authority figures can allow students to test ideas and make mistakes to help them grow in an environment receptive to errors (Miles, 2011). Additionally, allowing students to be a part of the conversation of the technical aspects of the university governance for an extended period provides insight into processes and structure (Bambenek & Sifton, 2003). It is important to examine the relationships between authority figures and student government participants, because it helps to clarify the ways in which these relationships can help advance or hinder the development of the student and the decision-making process.

Authority figures to student government participants can be a variety of individuals with whom they interact. Campus personnel who serve in administrative roles are certainly authority figures. Additionally, campus staff members who directly advise student government are significant authority figures. Faculty members who serve on committees with student participants, as well as interacting in the classroom, also carry authority. Fellow student peers
who are more experienced in student governance or are older are also seen as authority figures. Any individual who may hold information needed in decision-making provides historical context, or is viewed as experienced, can be an authority figure to a student participant (Miles, 2011).

An authority figure to a student government participant must maintain a high level of honesty to build trust accomplished by providing transparency when discussing processes and information, as well as maintaining a level of confidentiality with the student (Laosebikan-Buggs, 2006; Miller & Miles, 2008). Building a positive relationship with the student by showing them respect, support, and general care and concern will develop trust within the authority-student relationship (Laosebikan-Buggs, 2006; Miles, 2011).

The educator role and the influencer role are presented within the literature when looking at authority figures interacting with student government participants. When authority figures fulfill the educator role, they act as a guide in order to help develop student skills, serve as a resource, and act as a mentor. An authority figure also assumes the role of influencer. This role can be a positive aspect of the relationship, with the authority figure using their positional power to advocate on behalf of student government. Additionally, an influencer may be a negative influence, serving only their self-interest. These two premises show the critical role authority figures play in the decision-making of student government participants (Bruhn, Zajac, Al-Kazemi, & Prescott Jr., 2002; Healy, Lancaster, Liddell, & Stewart, 2012; Kezar, 2010).

**Educator role.** Authority figures who interact with student government members serve in an educator role in multiple ways. The authority positional power used when interacting with student government participants is a critical asset to promote growth in student learning. Helping to foster student development, serving as a resource and mentoring are ways in which
authority figures can aid student government participants in decision-making (Golden & Schwartz, 1994; Laosebikan-Buggs, 2006).

Student development. Those who act as authority figures to student government members serve in an educational role to help the student develop skills. Providing structured opportunities for students to engage in critical thinking skills, problem-solving, and social skill-building is essential for an authority figure educator (Kezar, 2010). Additionally, providing an environment for students to engage in trial and error for learning how to navigate the institution’s organizational system helps build confidence and competence (Miles, 2011). Helping students learn to express anger, frustration, and ambivalence in a safe environment when learning how to perform their student government duties is a responsibility of an authority figure (Bruhn, Zajac, Al-Kazemi, & Prescott Jr., 2002; Miles, 2011).

When guiding skill development in the un-experienced, it is important for the authority figure to know when to step out of a situation. Challenging student government participants to take the initiative to solve problems on their own is crucial in the development of decision-making (Love & Guthrie, 1999; Miles, 2011). Taking a step back empowers students to seek outside resources, other contributors, and form their solution to a problem (Kezar, 2010). Ultimately, being available to support when needed aids the student to development.

Student government participants look to authority figures for feedback. The process of providing feedback is an opportunity for the authority figure to provide a safe, nurturing environment. Providing feedback about how students approach problem-solving in a constructive way is another additive to the development of student growth (Love & Guthrie, 1999). Understanding this role as an educator will benefit the overall working relationship to help build skills and create better decision-makers in institutional governance.
Resource. Student government participants look to authority figures as knowledgeable resources for background information and contextualization to institutional inner workings (Miles, 2011). Because of the perception that faculty, staff, and administration are experts in either their field or of the overall institution, students rely on information provided by campus authority figures (Whitmire, 2004). It is important that authority figures interacting with student government participants carefully consider how much and what specific information to share with students. Some students may not know how to discern between various types of information, or know how to gather useful information about a subject, and may take the authority figure’s information at face value (Whitmire, 2004). The student perceives the authority figure as having expertise which wields power and should be used to best help student government participants with decision-making (Kezar, 2010).

One of the best ways to be a resource for student government members is by helping students navigate working with the institutional administration or other governing bodies. As a resource for student government participants, “helping students to negotiate” with decision-making bodies empowers them to work with others in solving problems (Kezar, 2010, p.463). The student is empowered by various training experiences on communication skills, making active contributions, and how to act appropriately within formal settings (Elassy, 2013).

Mentor. Another powerful way that an authority figure serves in an educator role is by being a mentor to student government participants. Authority figures who interact more often with student government members are more likely to fulfill a mentor role, some serving as a positive role model (Miller & Kraus, 2004). An established relationship creates trust between the student and authority figure (Healy, Lancaster, Liddell, & Stewart, 2012; Miles, 2011). This trust provides the ability for the student mentee to rely upon the authority figure to provide real
and authentic feedback (Healy et al., 2012; Miles, 2011). A mentor also provides other educator roles mentioned before, helping build development of skills and serving as a resource. But, due to the closer relationship established, the mentor must make sure to set appropriate boundaries (Healy et al., 2012; Kezar, 2010). It is valuable for a mentor to cautiously balance between empowerment of being a strong support for the student and disempowering the student by becoming overly influential, cognizant of how the guidance of an authority figure may influence the mentee (Kezar, 2010).

**Influencer.** A strong influence at an institution can be tied to the position of an authority figure. The influential power an authority figure has can help serve student government participants by advocating on their behalf. Using positional power to influence students in their skill development is a strong, positive role. Alternatively, influence by an authority figure can be used negatively to get students to fulfill authority interest instead of fulfillment of the student’s self-interest (Kezar, 2010).

**Student advocate.** A positive way authority figures can use the power of influence is by serving as a student advocate. Based on the level of student government power and authority, students may not be allowed to sit on certain committees or boards. Because of this, faculty, staff, and administration need to have the student’s best interest at the forefront and advocate on their behalf (Beeny, Garvey-Nix, Rhodes, & Terrell, 2008; Golden & Schwartz, 1994). An example of a group in which the student cannot self-represent is the Board of Trustees. In most instances, students are not allowed a voting seat on these Boards, but many faculty and administrators do have this right (Beeny et al., 2008). As a campus authority figure, it is important to be knowledgeable about what the students’ needs and issues are to communicate to the Board of Trustees; otherwise they would not be represented (Beeny et al., 2008).
Another way to serve as an advocate is by being the conduit for the student government to faculty or administration (Kezar, 2010). As student government participants may not have access to certain information, having the students’ interest as the primary vision will help advocate in their absence. According to Kezar (2010), as an ultimate student advocate, an authority figure should always promote the inclusion of students on decision-making bodies. The student voice has recognized importance and should be included when making decisions affecting the institution and ultimately, the student body.

**Negative influencer.** Unfortunately, as an influencer, there could be inappropriate use of the authority role. Since an authority figure is typically viewed to be knowledgeable, a student government participant can be taken advantage of. The student may consider the authority figure to be parent-like, placing trust in that authority figure (Bruhn et al., 2002). Depending on the maturity level and critical thinking skills of the student, an authority figure could lead the student to make decisions self-serving to the authority figure (Bruhn et al., 2002; Kezar, 2010; Pingle, 1997). Because of the power of student voice, authority figures can leverage this advantage to gain things at an institution they may not have been successful in advocating for themselves (Kezar, 2010).

An initiative brought by student government on behalf of an authority figure may be taken more seriously by administration (Kezar, 2010). An authority figure can use this to their advantage by urging students to take on an initiative. Additionally, authority figures know student government oversees student fee money, and thus have a budget. Student governments are brought into initiatives because they have money to help the cause (Kezar, 2010). Someone who is in a role as an influencer must be careful when engaging student government in initiatives if it does not benefit the student body. Negative influence can lead to an unsatisfactory
experience for the students, negatively impacting feelings toward the student participants from the institution (Bray, 2006; Kezar, 2010).

**Conclusion of present day student government participation.** The students who participate in present day student government gain many skills and learning experiences through building general competencies, from organization and time management to learning social and critical thinking skills. Students rapidly develop these skills when they learn institutional policies and politics and as they interact with numerous faculty, staff, and administration. Navigating the bureaucratic institutional governance systems and various authority relationships contribute to forming the basis for how these students make decisions in their roles as student representatives.

**Student Government Decision-Making**

There are multiple aspects of higher education in which student government participants are invited to discuss and help in making institutional decisions. Depending on where the student government falls in the institutional governance structure, and the duties afforded to them, student government participants can be called upon to make a wide variety of decisions. To understand what these decisions are, and what participating in student governance means will benefit both students and the institution for exploring how students make decisions. There is a dearth in the literature regarding the important topic of how student government participants make decisions. This section examined the available findings in student government decision-making.

A review of the literature presented two topics related to student government decision-making. The first topic presented an overview of decision-making, indicating the types and breadth of decisions made, as well as government structure models. The second topic covered the perceptions of decisions made by student government. This topic was explored specifically
to analyze the perceptions of faculty and administration, student constituents, and student government participants.

**Decision-making.** Student government members make a broad range of decisions in their roles. It is important to understand the types and breadth of the decisions that these students take on as it affects multiple parties in higher education and beyond. In this section, the government structure models of student governance were discussed to contextualize and demonstrate the varying degrees’ significance of decisions in which student government takes part. The types and breadth of decisions were also described to show how important student government decisions are in higher education.

**Government structures.** The types of decisions student government participants are afforded to make are dependent on where they fall in the institutional governance structure and the varying levels of autonomy they have from the institution (Klemenčič, 2014). The structures and processes in which a student government represents their student constituents are based on the authority granted by the state and by the institution (Klemenčič, 2014). Based on these factors, there are three models of student governance identified in the literature (*Figure 1*). The model names differ in the literature, but the context of the relationship within the institutional governance structure is the same. Model One is called either independent student government or the authoritarian-paternalistic approach (Cuyjet, 1994; Klemenčič, 2014). Model Two is referred to as either community governance or managerial governance (Cuyjet, 1994; Klemenčič, 2014). Model Three is called democratic collegiate institutional governance or referred to as a combination of independent and community governance (Cuyjet, 1994; Klemenčič, 2014).

Model One is characterized by recognition of the student government by the institution, and the primary purpose is to oversee student activities and give student perspective (Klemenčič,
2014). Within Model One, examples of student government authority would be to provide fee funding for student organizations and serve on a committee within the academic community, but only as a student advisor. Model Two has student government participants serving as consultants on behalf of students with other campus stakeholders. In this model students have voting rights on some institutional bodies, but are “largely ceremonial posts without a vote or real voice” (Cuyjet, 1994, p. 74; Klemenčič, 2014). Model Three is found to be the most useful student government model as it is the most autonomous from its institution legally and financially (Klemenčič, 2014). Governmental structures characterized by this model operate a separate, independent governing body granting institutional decision-making rights, such as a vote on Academic Senate (Cuyjet, 1994; Klemenčič, 2014).

Understanding the model type of student government is beneficial to learning more about how student participants make decisions. The model upon which a student government operates has an effect on the overall institutional governance because the students may only be able to make certain types of decisions. The perceived level of power and actual power bestowed on student participants can increase or decrease participation in decision-making.

*Types of decisions.* As illustrated in the student government model structures, there are varying types of decisions made by student government participants. Depending on the level of shared governance participation, students may make decisions in an institution beyond student activities. The responsibilities conferred upon student government participants are substantial, requiring the student to follow through on delegated tasks given to them by the school, such as assigning students to sit on committees and varying boards throughout the institution (Miles, 2011).
Students sitting on various committees and boards will have a vote and provide student input on all aspects of an institution. These students will be in decision-making bodies with faculty members, institutional administrators, and professional staff. Types of decisions could have immediate implications or influence policy with long-term effects, extending beyond the student’s time at the institution (Bambenek & Sifton, 2003).

Additionally, students participating in student government will make decisions on issues not delegated to them by the institution. If a student government is making a decision on a student-initiated issue, they are bringing the concern from the students to the university (Lizzio & Wilson, 2009). For example, students asking for a smoke-free campus. If the institution is not responding to the needs of the student body, the student government may decide to fill a void not provided by the institution (May, 2010). Students can create specific programs or services the institution does not have resources to provide, such as safe shuttle transportation at night (Klemenčič, 2014).

**Breadth of decisions.** Student government participants take part in an assortment of decisions within their organization, the institution, the university system, and the state legislature. The level of autonomy and the position of the student government in the institutional decision-making structure often leads to these students making significant decisions at all levels. It is important to understand that the breadth of decisions that student government participants make can affect the future operation of an institution (Wooten, Hunt, LeDuc, & Poskus, 2012).

The extent of these impactful decisions can be substantial, with decisions bearing on changes to campus infrastructure, strategic planning, fee distribution, and much more (Wooten, Hunt, LeDuc, & Poskus, 2012). If a student has a vote on all institutional committees, they are bearing the responsibility of representing the entire student body on every issue. Due to the
breadth of decision types to be made, many of the decisions will have wide-ranging impacts and implications (Lizzio & Wilson, 2009). The student representative must express the view of the student body and vote on a decision they think is best for students and the future of the institution. They are the biggest advocate for the student body and protector of student rights (Love & Miller, 2003).

**Perceptions of decisions.** Perceptions of current student government in the United States vary based on the degree to which individuals have interacted with institutional governance. Some may see these groups as token student representatives with little control over campus decisions (Lewis & Rice, 2005). Others may see them as puppets of the administration (Mackey, 2006; Miles, 2011). Student constituents may only see student government as coordinating fun activities, but want more significant contributions from their representatives (Cuyjet, 1994). The perception of student government from the faculty and administration matters when considering the ability of the student government to function effectively. These two groups are important, as they are the majority decision makers in the shared-governance process. As the practice of shared governance has been curtailed over the years, the administration is edging out students in decision-making, just as they are doing with faculty (Miles, Miller, & Nadler, 2008). Often, negative perceptions about student government participants are perpetuated by faculty and administration, thus giving a prejudicial justification for excluding students in decision-making (Luescher-Mamashela, 2013; Menon, 2003). For a student government to be impactful, it is imperative it recognizes and takes advantage of its decision-making rights. Faculty, staff, and administrators are responsible for teaching students about those rights (Love & Miller, 2003).

The perception of student government members is important in decision-making. Perceptions can negatively or positively influence whether a student participant can or will make
a decision in their role. Groups in which they consistently interact with in their roles will be discussed: faculty and administration, student constituents, and themselves.

**Faculty and administration.** The literature presented findings indicating faculty and administration who work with student government representatives have a tendency toward negative perceptions of students (Elassy, 2013; Menon, 2003; Miles, Miller, & Nadler, 2008; Miller & Miles, 2008). There is a trend to exclude students from the shared governance process because of these negative attitudes (Miles et al., 2008). Some of the negative opinions about students are that they are too immature to understand the decision, that the students are just serving self-interests, and that they are only concerned with immediate results (Lizzio & Wilson, 2009; Miles et al., 2008; Miles, 2011).

It is necessary for faculty, staff, and administration to understand these negative perceptions can be detrimental to the decision-making process for students. Whether perceptions are “real or imagined,” they affect how students make decisions when working with campus officials (Lizzio & Wilson, 2009). As campus officials are authority figures to student government participants, students encounter situations where they may receive patronizing comments, yet still must endure negative staff attitude toward them while trying to engage in conversation as an equal (Lizzio & Wilson, 2009). These situations can create distress with the student participant who must make decisions on behalf of the student body while navigating the expectations of the administration (Lizzio & Wilson, 2009).

**Student constituents.** The perception of student government decision-making that the student voters have is important. Findings in the literature showed that students who are represented by student government see those members in a negative light (Kennedy, Ginsburg, Harnois, & Spooner, 2015; Menon, 2003). Some students may view student government as
serving the administration, only making decisions the institution tells them to make (Mackey, 2006; Miles, 2011). Other student constituents may see student government only serving sub-populations of the student body, and not representing the full diversity of the student body (Kennedy, Ginsburg, Harnois, & Spooner, 2015; Klemenčič, 2014; Miles, 2011). A study conducted by Cuyjet (1994) found students want their student government representatives to tackle issues such as tuition increases and campus safety. Polling of student government representatives revealed they claim to be working on these matters (Cuyjet, 1994; Lizzio & Wilson, 2009). The discordance between perception and reality affects the student attitude, in that what is visible to the student body is seen as the only action being taken by its representatives. The perception is not influenced by work done behind the scenes that goes unnoticed.

**Student government participants.** The perception that student government participants have of themselves in their roles directly influences how they make decisions. If the student does not clearly understand how their role works or what they can do in their role, it may affect how or if the student participant makes decisions (Lizzio & Wilson, 2009). Those who advise student government have a duty to teach and train the student participants of their responsibilities and scope of power (Miles, 2011). The amount and type of decisions made are dependent on which government structure model is in place. Understanding this helps eliminate ambiguity and can alleviate any uncertainty that the student may have when making decisions. The perception of the positive significance of the student is important in the overall participation in decision-making (Lizzio & Wilson, 2009; Manns, 2006).

Additionally, student government participants have the perception that it is stressful to learn how to balance all they do. These students must learn how to balance the issues brought to
them by the student body, advocate for these matters, and negotiate solutions with college personnel (Lizzio & Wilson, 2009). If there is intense pressure from one or more of the non-student groups, student government participants face tough decisions to faithfully serve the best interest of the student population while maintaining a positive relationship with institutional governance.

**Conclusion to student government decision-making.** Exploring the context of decisions made by student government participants demonstrated the full range of responsibilities bestowed upon this student group. The effect of decisions made by student government range from irrelevant to institution altering. Additionally, the perceptions of student government are also important in the decision-making process. If there are negative viewpoints of student government from faculty, administration, and student constituents, student government participants face great adversity in decision-making. Exploring these literature topics showed the relevance of student government decision-making to the function of the institution. In order for campus authority figures to better serve the students it is essential to further learn about how student government members make decisions.

**Conclusion**

The historical foundations presented of student government involvement in higher education showed how the participants’ roles have unified student voice to communicate with university administrations. These frameworks demonstrated the power of students elected to represent the student body, and to provide services and activities that the university cannot. The recent work on student development has led to a greater understanding of what students learn from their experience and what the institutions gain from their involvement. Students learn skills
and gain competencies that lead to benefits for the student educationally, as well as the institution.

Authority figures play a significant role in overall development and advocacy for the student's voice. The effect, for better or worse, the authority figure has on the student is evident. The support authority figures have given to students throughout the evolution of student government has been essential for providing the opportunities for currently engaged student government practices. Relationships between students and authority figures may create a cyclical issue where negative perceptions of student government lead to student government ineffectiveness. When students are not supported or are thought of as unimportant, they are at risk of becoming apathetic, leading to decreased perception of student government efficacy.

The authority figures who have close relationships with student government participants, such as advisors, have a responsibility to the students to curb this cycle and increase the effectiveness and learning potential of their college experience.

Summary

The objective of this study was to understand the perceptions of students while they were acting in their official student government roles with respect to other students, the institution, the government structure, authority figures, and themselves during the decision-making process. This objective is important because administration, faculty and staff guide students in making decisions and their interaction can substantially affect decision outcomes. There was insufficient literature to understand how student government participants approach decision-making. This study began to address this by exploring the perceptions and experiences of students with respect to decision-making in their official role as a student government representative.
Chapter Three: Research Design

This study was designed to understand how undergraduate student government participants at a state university in California made decisions in their official roles through their own perceptions and experiences. Presenting the student narrative based on first-hand accounts of experiences in the decision-making process provided insight into a small group of student government participants to inform professional practice in higher education (Butin, 2010; May, 2010).

Research Question

How do undergraduate student government participants at a state university make sense of the decision-making process they undergo in official meetings?

Qualitative Research Approach

Scholar practitioners use conceptual frameworks to approach research and practice. A conceptual framework is comprised of a research paradigm, theory, and research approach, informed by the researcher’s positionality with respect to the research question (Butin, 2010; Merriam, 1991). It is important to parse out each framework element to understand how they inform research, while simultaneously understanding how they work together to shape a study. The conceptual framework is “an argument about why the topic one wishes to study matters, and why the means proposed to study it are appropriate and rigorous” (Ratvich & Riggan, 2012, p. 7).

This study employed a qualitative research method with a constructivist-interpretivist paradigm approach to explore how student government participants understood their decision-making within their representative roles. Qualitative research methods allow scholars to focus on a phenomenon holistically (Creswell, 2012; Ryan, Coughlan, & Cronin, 2007).
individual experiences in relation to a central phenomenon, and is not intended for generalizing data for a larger population (Ryan, Coughlan, & Cronin, 2007).

A research paradigm is described as a group of assumptions that are interrelated to provide a philosophical framework for the organized study (Ponterotto, 2005). Within qualitative research, the researcher’s use of a chosen paradigm contains “epistemological, ontological and methodological premises that guide” research actions (Anfara & Mertz, 2006, p. xxi). In other words, the adoption of a paradigm dictates the use of the researcher’s knowledge of their reality about the central phenomenon and the approach to how they collect and analyze the data (Creswell, 2013). The research paradigm for this study was the constructivist-interpretivist paradigm. This paradigm was directed at observations resulting in the viewing of a reality not discoverable and measurable, but constructed by the human mind (Merriam, 1991). The constructivist-interpretivist approach is derived from and incorporates the perspective and experience of the researcher (Riegler, 2012). The researcher’s perspective and experience comes from deep reflection and by close interaction with the participant wherein they jointly “create findings from their interactive dialogue and interpretation” (Ponterotto, 2005, p. 129).

In this instance, a constructivist-interpretivist paradigm approach was appropriate to explore individual experiences of decision-making by student government participants because of the extensive personal experience of the researcher as a student government advisor. The researcher “shares in the world of the researched and then interprets what he or she experienced” through direct involvement of interviewing, observing and analyzing the phenomenon (Merriam, 1991, p. 49).
**Interpretative phenomenological analysis.** The research tradition utilized in this study was Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Literature of college student leader decision-making abilities is not well developed, particularly with respect to student government participants. Of particular importance, using IPA allowed for examination in fine detail of students making sense of their decision-making experience within the shared governance structure of an institution (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Furthermore, the IPA approach permitted the researcher to incorporate personal experience relating to students making decisions by viewing their experiences through the lens of a former student government advisor. Additionally, the researcher used the experience of witnessing student development and student government impact on the institution broadly to contextualize how the student interpreted their experience.

**Methodology, philosophical underpinnings and overview.** IPA is a recently developed qualitative approach, with beginnings in the mid-1990s. This approach draws on three distinct theoretical underpinnings: phenomenology, hermeneutics, and ideography (Shinebourne, 2011; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). The purpose of the IPA approach is to understand detailed meaning-making of a particular phenomenon in the participant’s world, and to relay the experience of the subject through the researcher from the third person perspective (Larkin, Eatough, & Osborn, 2011; Shinebourne, 2011; Smith, 2004).

The first theoretical base of IPA is phenomenology. Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) attribute the phenomenological roots to the philosophers Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty. Pertinent to IPA, their work guides researchers toward the focus on a reflection process to understand an individuals’ perception of being in the world. In other words, scholars focus on
comprehension of the lived experience (Shinebourne, 2011). IPA research focuses on the interpretation of the meaning-making of the lived experience, this is known as hermeneutics.

Hermeneutics is the second theoretical underpinning of IPA. This theory of interpretation comes from the works of Schleiermacher, Heidegger, and Gadamer (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Within IPA, the role of the researcher is recognized and the researcher is permitted to think about the participant’s meaning of the experience as closely as possible (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006; Shinebourne, 2011). This can be achieved by double hermeneutics where “the participant is trying to make sense of their personal and social world; the researcher is trying to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of their personal and social world” (Smith, 2004, p. 40). IPA allows the researcher to become part of the hermeneutic circle to understand the whole and the parts of the whole, becoming a part of the chain of experience connection (Smith, 2011; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). In order to achieve a detailed examination of the experience, the researcher must look at the precise specifics.

The third theoretical influence of IPA is ideography, which is concerned with looking at the particular. This theoretical influence guides the researcher to work with small samples to get a rich, detail-filled account (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). It also sets up a systematic approach to analyzing the data focusing on one case at a time to draw out as much detail from that particular person (Smith, 2004; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). It is appropriate with the ideography influence to have a single case, urging a study have no more than ten cases so each case is given sufficient time and attention (Smith, 2004).

**Critiques of the methodology.** IPA has been criticized as a “simply descriptive methodology” or “one of the least demanding methods in qualitative psychology” (Larkin,
Watts, & Clifton, 2006, p.102). IPA researchers address the descriptive comment as being only part of the process, adding that the interpretation of the participant goes further to reveal what the particular context means to them (Larkin et al., 2006). Further criticism points to the ideographic base of IPA, saying that the small sample does not say anything substantive as the data are only produced by the participant’s account (Smith, 2004). In response, the deep analysis of the small sample puts a researcher in the position “to think about how we and other people might deal with the particular situation being explored” and “brings us closer to significant aspects of a shared humanity” (Smith, 2004, p.43).

**Intended outcome of using IPA.** The IPA methodology was chosen intentionally, in order to explore the personal meaning and sense-making of student government participants who have shared an experience in making decisions about official meeting agenda items (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). These student participants shared a similar experience of making a decision on the same agenda item, but may have interpreted the situation, their identity, and how to evoke the appropriate rules of the situation and identity differently (March, 1994; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). The methodology of IPA paired with the theoretical framework of logic of appropriateness helped inform the exploration of student government participants’ experiences with decision-making (March, 1994; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Using the logic of appropriateness framework with the methodology of IPA highlighted the individual identity and the situations encountered by each individual student as they made decisions in their official role (March, 1994; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). IPA methodology allowed for examination and subsequent understanding by the student of the behavior that went into a decision. Through the lens of the logic of appropriateness, the student participant was
encouraged to think, discuss, and reflect on a personal judgment, describing the situation, their identity and the appropriate rules of a decision made (March, 1994).

IPA methodology informed the data collection strongly by the type of participant selection, types of interviews, sample numbers, researcher role during interviews and participant journaling (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Within this study the sample size was small, five participants of a roughly homogeneous population of undergraduate college students who have undergone a similar experience (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). The small sample size assisted the researcher in maintaining careful and intense analysis of each individual, as well as the ability to produce a rich amount of data about the central phenomenon (Smith, 2004; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

The interview structure within IPA methodology encourages semi-structured, loose agenda questions to encourage the participants “to tell their stories, to speak freely and reflectively” (Smith, 2004; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, p. 56). This type of interviewing allowed the researcher to be a participant in the conversation, asking follow-up questions not in the interview script to learn additional information about the participant’s experience (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). While the IPA methodology calls for the researcher to be an active participant in the interview, the participant must lead the conversation (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). The researcher did not interject her own interpretation into the interview, which may influence the statements of the participant, but rather utilized their interpretation of the experience as a comparative experience later in the data analysis phase (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). In addition to interviews, participant journaling is encouraged to supplement data collection so the study benefits from more personal thoughts and feelings (Larkin, Eatough, &
Osborn, 2011; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). This study used participant journaling for data collection, along with interviews.

During the interviews with the student participants, examination of official meeting agenda items occurred for occasions in which the participant made a decision. The decision was broken down using the logic of appropriateness. Participants were asked to interpret their identities in a situation, and the rules surrounding the situation. Through this discussion, the students interpreted their understanding of their decisions (March, 1994; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). These discussions were aided using the IPA methodology, in which the student made sense of how they made decisions and how they felt about the experience (March, 1994; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). This helped the researcher in the analysis phase of the study, when interpreting the participant’s understanding of how they made decisions (Larkin, Eatough, & Osborn, 2011; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

Data analysis via IPA methodology employs a case-by-case analysis technique whereby each case is examined in detail, individually, until all are analyzed (Smith, 2004; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). There is a six-step analysis process per individual case. The first step is to read and reread a participant’s interview transcripts and journal entries several times (Fade, 2004; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Initial researcher reactions to the participant’s accounts are recorded during this phase, and it is encouraged for the researcher to slowly and deliberately reflect upon the accounts in order to actively engage with the data (Reagan, 2015; Symeonides & Childs, 2015). Step two is to identify emergent themes based on descriptive comments, language and mannerisms, and understanding of the participant within the topic (Regan, 2015; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). The third step is for the researcher to define the themes, thereby reducing the volume of detail and incorporating the researcher interpretation (Conroy & de
Visser, 2014; Reagan, 2015; Symeonides & Childs, 2015). The fourth step is to look for relationships between emergent themes and identify patterns (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). The fifth step of analysis is to repeat the previous steps with the next participant until each participant’s data are themed (Conroy & de Visser, 2014; Regan, 2015). Lastly, the sixth step is to find patterns across the participants to find consistency and meaningful accounts of the participants’ experiences (Regan, 2015; Symeonides & Childs, 2015).

**Site Selection and Participants**

This study engaged purposeful sampling. Creswell (2012) states this type of sampling within qualitative research applies to both study sites and individuals fulfilling a standard of being rich of information. The initial purposeful sampling strategy for this study began with a convenience sampling approach. The convenience sampling pertains to the ease of access to the study site and participants at the researcher’s former place of employment (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Institutional Review Board permission was given from both the researcher’s home institution, as well as the study site institution. After permission was given from the selected site to study the student government participants, the sampling strategy was purposeful homogeneous sampling.

The strategy of homogeneous sampling is used frequently among IPA researchers to represent a “perspective, rather than a population” (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2012, p. 49). Homogeneous sampling concentrates on participants that have similar social characteristics or demographics (Creswell, 2013; Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). The purposefully sampled student government participants who were members of a subgroup of student government participants within the American higher education system (Creswell, 2012). The sample of participants engaged in an Associated Students within a large university system in
the state of California. The students were all undergraduates at the same university in the same student organization.

California State University Associated Students. This study focused on an auxiliary student government organization called Associated Students. The Associated Students for this study is at a single California State University campus. The California State University System has twenty-three campuses located throughout the state of California. Each campus has an Associated Students, which acts as the student body government. The majority of these Associated Students organizations operate as non-profit auxiliary corporations of each campus within the system. According to Executive Order number 698, Board of Trustees Policy for The California State University Auxiliary Organizations (1999, March 3):

An auxiliary organization is any non-profit entity which (1) has agreed to comply with the applicable requirements of the Board of Trustees and campus; (2) is included in the list of officially recognized auxiliary organizations in good standing maintained by the Chancellor pursuant to Section 42406, infra, and (3) maintains the status of an auxiliary organization in good standing.

Within the California Education Code, Section 89300, the authority of establishment has been granted to these certain student body organizations by the state of California. Within the code of establishing authority, it is stated:

Under the supervision of the university officials for the purpose of providing essential activities closely related to, but not normally included as a part of, the regular instructional program of the university. The organization may also operate a campus store, a cafeteria, and other projects not inconsistent with the purposes of the university, and property of the university may be leased to the organization for those purposes.
The Associated Students organizations that operate as auxiliary organizations may collect a student fee authorized by the Board of Trustees of their home institution (California Education Code, Section 89300). The regulations set forth on auxiliary organizations about collecting student fees are:

If, in any fiscal year, a majority of the funding of the auxiliary organization is received from student fees collected on a campus or system-wide, at least a majority of the Board of Directors of that auxiliary organization shall consist of California State University students with full voting privileges on that Board.

In addition to the Associated Students operating as the student body government, this group of individuals who were current students served as the auxiliary organization’s Board of Directors. Within the framework models of student government representational structures (Figure 1), Associated Students are categorized in Model Three.

**Meetings.** As a Board of Directors, Associated Students must hold at least one business meeting during each fiscal year (California Education Code, Section 89903). Meetings are governed by the state of California’s Gloria Romero Open Meetings Act of 2000. Official legislative bodies, such as an Associated Students, must abide by the Open Meetings Act to conduct business in public meetings (California Education Code 89305). The Gloria Romero Act addresses rules for posting official meeting agendas, decisions made in official action items, special meetings, and items which may be discussed officially in a closed session (California Education Code, Sections 89305-89307). Associated Students members who make an official decision do so by only voting on an action item in an agenda.

Action taken means a collective decision made by a majority of the members of a legislative body, a collective commitment or promise by a majority of the members of a
legislative body to make a positive or a negative decision, or an actual vote by a majority of the members of a legislative body when sitting as a body or entity, upon a motion, proposal, report, resolution, order, or recommendation (California Education Code, Section 89305).

**Financial responsibilities.** Associated Students Board of Directors has multiple financial responsibilities to the organization and university in which they serve. The overall operating budget of Associated Students includes student fees based on overall headcount per semester. The university president approves the operating budget and forwards it to the Chancellor of California State University (Executive Order 288, 1982, January 1). The Board of Directors approves all expenditures and fund appropriations made by the auxiliary (California Education Code, Section 89904). As an auxiliary, Associated Students must comply with official audits that ensure compliance with policies set forth by the Board of Trustees (Executive Order 698, 1999, March 3). The students who serve on the Board of Directors must submit information needed for audits and officially sign-off approval of organization documents.

**Business responsibilities.** The student Board of Directors must run the daily operations of the auxiliary. Duties can include operating commercial services for the purpose of the university. It can also include serving as the “bank” for recognized student organizations, as well as providing a multitude of services for the entire student body. Such responsibilities for operating an auxiliary business can include leasing of space, construction for commercial services, and vendor contracts. The Board of Directors has the ultimate say over all business responsibilities for the auxiliary, and as such must comply with all regulations stipulated.

**Governance responsibilities.** Associated Students has the right to self-govern the corporation they run within the limitations of the organization’s Articles of Incorporation,
Bylaws and Codes of Governance. Associated Students is held accountable by the university president to ensure that the self-governing practices are within the prescribed limits. Within the corporation, the authority of the Board of Directors is to approve policies and procedures that are consistent with all corporation governing documents. The Board of Directors may also pass resolutions that affect the Associated Students directly or may serve as the official voice of the students with university administration.

The particular Associated Students in this study has designated members of the Board of Directors and Executive Officers who serve in an official capacity with the university administration and Academic Senate. The extent of authority students have to make decisions is the corporation itself and a select few committees within the university where the student has a vote. Within the Academic Senate, the Associated Students has one voting seat and three sub-committees allow for student representatives to vote. The majority of committees within Academic Senate do not include an official student vote or appropriation of decision-making power. However, numerous committees elsewhere within the university do have student representation and voting rights. In these instances, the Board of Directors and Executive Officers represent the student body.

**Study site.** The particular Associated Students used in this study was the former site where the researcher served as the advisor to the student government. This site was chosen because of the familiarity of the organizational structure and professional experience of the researcher working with student government participants at this institution. The site was also chosen for ease of access to participants due to professional relationships between the researcher and professional staff at this particular Associated Students. It has been three years since the researcher last worked at the study site. For the purpose of conducting a qualitative
Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis study, it is appropriate for the researcher to have connections with the participants’ experiences in order to lead to more accurate interpretations of the data (Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

There were seventeen positions on the Associated Students Board of Directors at the time of the study. Three of the seventeen positions were the executive officers. The other fourteen positions were various representative roles that represent one of the four academic colleges within the university college structure, those who have not declared academic major, or special student populations. For the purpose of anonymity for the student participants, the official title role of representation was not specified. Only the use of executive officer and representative were used to clarify the category of the student participant within the Board of Directors structure.

All the student participants were classified as undergraduate students. There were seven females and ten males. Of the seventeen student members only four students had previously served on the Board of Directors. The remaining thirteen students had never served as a representative on the Board of Directors in Associated Students. The students received forms of compensation for serving in their role on the Board of Directors. The executive officers worked a minimum of ten hours per week during the summer and twenty hours per week during the fall and spring semester. These officers were compensated an hourly wage, a campus parking pass, and early access to course registration. The representatives served a minimum of five hours per week with a compensation of a parking pass and early access to course registration.

The Associated Students had a total of seven Board of Directors meetings throughout the fall 2016 semester and six during the spring 2017 semester. These meetings happened bi-
monthly. There were also five separate Associated Students committee meetings, occurring monthly. All Board of Directors members had to attend the Board of Directors meetings and sit on at least one Associated Students committee meeting. Additionally, there were university committee meetings these students sat on in either an advisory or voting member role. The number of official meetings these students participated in during the fall 2016 semester and early spring 2017 semester was sufficient to give ample opportunities for the student to reflect on decisions made in their official role.

**Participants.** The study’s target for participant numbers was between four and eight participants out of the seventeen members of the Associated Students. Initially, seven participants began the study. Two participants were removed from the study before data collection completion, due to not meeting the required minimum grade point average required of Board of Directors members. The total number of participants who completed the study was five. This sample size is consistent with IPA practices, which encourage concentration on a small number of cases (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2012). The participant profile provided in Table 1 displays the alias name of the participant, age at the time of data collection, identified gender, major, number of committees sitting on at time of data collection, prior experience in Associated Students, and whether they were an executive officer or representative.

**Table 1: Participant Profiles**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Major</th>
<th>Number of Committees</th>
<th>Prior AS Experience</th>
<th>Position</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Isabel</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Biology</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Representative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jay</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Communications</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Representative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paul</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Sociology &amp; Criminology</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Executive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scott</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Biology</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Representative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zack</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Economics</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Executive</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Each participant engaged in a first round in-person semi-structured interview with the researcher, a month of online journaling with at least one entry per week, and a final Skype video semi-structured interview with the researcher. Based on the number of participants, the data collection provided ten interview transcripts, and twenty journal entries transferred to a line-number transcript (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2012). This produced a total of thirty transcripts for data analysis.

**Procedures**

The study procedures began with approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Northeastern University and subsequently from the IRB of the study site. Upon approval, study participants were contacted based on purposeful sampling. Emails were sent to the sample of seventeen students that covered an introduction of the researcher, the study description, expectations of participation, compensation and benefits of participation (see Appendix B). Once students expressed interest in participating, a confirmation of the study procedures and expectations were provided over email (see Appendix C).

Once the sample was set and the student agreed to participate through email, on-site interviews were scheduled for the middle of the fall semester. The timing of the first-round interviews was intended to be after the students have taken part in at least one official student government meeting to ensure that official decisions had been made at the time of interviewing. The researcher spent approximately one week at the study site to fulfill in-person first-round interviews with participants. The interview location was agreed upon by the participant to ensure comfort during the interview. The first-round interview was approximately 60-90 minutes long. During the interview, the participant signed the informed consent form (see Appendix A), was asked general questions about their involvement in Associated Students,
questions about official meeting agendas where an action vote took place, and questions about available approved meeting minutes where a vote took place. The interview was audio recorded with a personal voice recorder device. A second audio recording device was also used as a backup. The audio recording was submitted to Rev, a web-based audio transcription service. The question prompts asked in the semi-structured first round interview are in Appendix D.

At the end of the first-round interview, the participants were instructed to create an account for an online personal journal via Penzu. The researcher and participants worked together to set weekly reminders to add entries. Each participant entry was shared with the researcher via a share feature in the journal and a notification of the journal entry was sent directly to the researcher’s school email address. The journal entries were listed in the researcher’s own journal entry listing in Penzu and were deleted after the conclusion of the study. The language was added in the participant informed consent that the participant may only share the journal entries with the researcher of this study.

Online journaling began the week following the first-round interview. Participants were asked to add entries in their journals for one month, writing at least one entry per week. One month of journaling was chosen to provide adequate opportunities for the student participants to engage in multiple official meetings in their role in student government. Participants were directed to submit journal entries to the researcher after each entry through a share feature in the online journal. The shared journal entries were in the researcher’s own journal entry list in Penzu. The journal entries were transferred to a Word document, formatted with line numbers for later data analysis. The weekly journal entry and submission frequency were detailed in the participant informed consent for participation in the study. The journal included thought prompts encouraging student participants to reflect on their decision-making experiences in their
official role as a student government participant during a one-month period. The journal procedures and thought prompts are in Appendix E.

Second interviews were scheduled with participants to take place one week after the journaling period concluded via Skype, an online video chat service. Skype interviews were semi-structured questions and were approximately 60 minutes in length. The Skype interviews were audio recorded on a personal recording device, along with a backup recording device. The audio recordings were then sent to Rev for transcription. The purpose of the Skype interview was to reflect further on the first-round interview, the one month of journaling, any action items on meeting agendas and decisions made, and to gain any further insight into the student’s experience in decision-making since the initial interview. The question prompts asked during the Skype interview are found in Appendix D.

After all data collection, participants were mailed a $20 gift card from their campus bookstore as compensation for participating in this study. Participants were notified about the compensation in the informed consent.

**Data Analysis**

Data analysis began with a thorough organization of materials collected. Materials from each participant included two transcribed Word documents of semi-structured interviews, four transcribed journal entries exported to Word documents, researcher field notes typed into Word documents, and audio files of interview recordings. For ease of case-by-case analysis, each participant case was saved as an individual computer file under the alias name given to each participant (Creswell, 2012; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). All Word documents were formatted for each line to be numbered. Each document contained three columns for the line number, transcript content and a blank column on the right side of the page for researcher notes.
The researcher employed the six-step approach of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis methodology to analyze the data.

Step one of data analysis was to read and re-read data materials (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). In this step, the researcher listened to recordings while reading transcripts to remind the researcher of the conversation with the participant (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). The researcher took notes in the blank column of major recollections and observations to bracket out, or set aside initial researcher perceptions before fully engaging in the participant’s experience (Creswell, 2013; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

The second step of data analysis was initial noting (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009) with three separate noting parts or coding: descriptive comments, linguistic comments and conceptual comments (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). The transcripts were read each time with only one coding comment type and were color coded accordingly to the type of note. For descriptive comments, the researcher looked for key phrases, words, and explanations that “matter to the participant” (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, p.84). As the researcher moved onto linguistic comments, the use of language that stuck out was noted, such as any repetition, lingo, tone of language, and metaphors (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). The third round of coding was observation of conceptual comments (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). This coding moved past specific words to accounts of feelings from the participant (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). At this point, the researcher reflected on her own personal experiences to develop any interpretations (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

Stage three of data analysis consisted of developing primary themes (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). The coding performed in stage two produced emergent themes (Saldaña, 2013). These emerging themes were used to help reduce volume throughout all data listing patterns and
connections for primary themes (Saldaña, 2013; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Once stage three was complete and primary themes were documented, stage four began, in which the researcher identified connections across primary themes (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). At this point, the researcher entered all primary theme data into an Excel spreadsheet to help further organize primary themes. Like themes were grouped together in a process of organization called code mapping (Saldaña, 2013). Finally, the grouped themes were condensed into overarching themes of the participant (Saldaña, 2013).

After stage four was complete, the researcher moved onto stage five, moving to the next case (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). The next participant, or case, was treated individually and separately from the preceding cases (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). The researcher did not incorporate the first case themes in the second case analysis to allow for the individuality of the second case (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). The steps used with the first case were used with each subsequent case. Once all cases were individually analyzed, following the first four steps, step six took place, in which the researcher looked for patterns across cases (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). In this last step, the overarching themes from all cases were analyzed together to look for patterns and connections across cases (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). The themes from all cases were once again input into an Excel file for organization. Overall themes were listed in this final step.

**Ethical considerations.** To maintain ethical treatment of study participants in this study the researcher began with informed consent. Participants were asked to read and sign an informed consent form (see Appendix A). The signed consent form was stored in sealed envelopes within the researcher’s paper files while conducting first-round interviews at the study site. Once the
researcher left the study site, the sealed envelopes were stored in the researcher’s home with all study material.

Content within the informed consent form covered a multitude of information to provide the participant with as much information as is needed for participation in the study. First, the anonymity of the participant was discussed. Confidentiality could not be promised as the researcher was interacting with the participant, thus the participant was not confidential to anyone (Ryan, Coughlan, & Cronin, 2007; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Additionally, the participant could not be “anonymous at all to other people within the setting who read the case” (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014, p. 63). To address anonymity, the participant identifiers were eliminated as much as possible throughout the study (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). The participant names were changed and the official roles the participants held in Associated Students were not revealed.

The amount of time and effort required was listed in the consent form, as well as the types of data collection (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). The purpose of the study, the possible outcomes of data analysis, and implications of their participation in the study was also included (Ryan, Coughlan, & Cronin, 2007; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Participants were notified in the consent form and throughout the data collection process they may withdraw at any time (Ryan, Coughlan, & Cronin, 2007; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). During the data collection process, the researcher “continuously evaluated” their own behavior and participant comfort (Marshall & Rossman, 2016, p. 126; Ryan, Coughlan, & Cronin, 2007). Support reference for psychological distress were contained within the consent form and were supplied to the participant throughout the data collection process (Ryan, Coughlan, & Cronin, 2007; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).
Trustworthiness. This study followed the two suggested approaches from Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis researchers to assess the quality and validity of qualitative research; Yardley’s criteria for demonstrating validity in qualitative research and the independent audit (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Yardley’s criteria is comprised of four principles for assessing the quality of the proposed study (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). The first principle is sensitivity to context. In an IPA study, the interaction with a purposive sample must be approached in such a way as to put the participant at ease, showing empathy and giving the participant voice with verbatim excerpts (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). The second principle is commitment and rigor (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Using this principle within an IPA study, the researcher provides a high “degree of attentiveness to the participant during data collection” demonstrating a strong commitment to each individual case (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, p. 181). The rigor of the study emerged from the researcher’s thoroughness, formation of appropriate questions, careful selection of a homogenous sample, and supporting participant experience with quotes (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). The third principle of Yardley’s criteria is transparency and coherence (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). The researcher demonstrated this principle by clearly providing rationale for selecting study site, participant sample, data collection steps, and data analysis steps (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). The final principle is impact and importance (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). This principle was achieved by producing useful information to inform professional practice (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

The second approach that was used in this IPA study was the independent audit. This approach checked the validity of the researcher’s final report by going through the “chain of evidence” of all documentation to verify that the process was coherent (Ryan, Coughlan, &
Cronin, 2007; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, p.183). The chain or trail of documentation consisted of forming the research question, the research proposal, interview schedules, interview recordings, transcripts, field notes, coding and theming, and reports (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). The trail should be complete such that the researcher can revisit the trail from the beginning to produce the same report, and independently someone else could also follow the same trail (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

**Researcher positionality.** The researcher worked as a student affairs professional for an Associated Students for ten years, three spent directly advising the Board of Directors. The Associated Students housed several student-focused entities. The Board of Directors was responsible for the oversight of all operations and entities within the corporation of Associated Students. These students were representatives elected from the student body to serve as the student government.

The Board of Directors was responsible for serving on university-wide committees, meeting with university administration and faculty, engaging with student constituents, and overseeing the operations of the corporation. The duties of the advisor included ensuring student representation on all committees on campus, and ensuring that students were engaged in committee work. An additional duty was to offer guidance to the Executive Board on oversight of the College Representatives and operational decisions. Further, the advisor served to provide information and resources to all students on the Board of Directors so that they may effectively execute their duties and make decisions laid out before them. The Board of Directors meetings were where all corporation decisions were made and issues that affected the student body were addressed. The management of meetings was by the Robert’s Rules of Parliamentary Procedure, and decisions made during meetings were official.
**Personal experiences.** Students were often observed interacting with professional staff and faculty as a part of their institutional decision-making. Some students would run for election to a position on the Board of Directors naïve to the responsibilities of the position. Students in representative roles were observed to work against each other to push forward personal agendas. Students would create coalitions to vote a certain way on an issue, particularly when they all were members of the same student organization, such as a Greek fraternity. Inter Board of Directors politics were frequently encountered; some years were more intense than others. Along with strife, students grew as leaders and took their roles in student government seriously.

**Beliefs, biases, and opinions.** The researcher believes student governments can be very powerful and influential. The types of decisions student government participants have to make can sometimes affect the way an institution will operate. It is also believed student government participants are sometimes taken advantage of to make decisions certain ways. People in authority positions can use their power and expertise to sway students to make a decision. For example, if the student feels intimidated by a faculty member on a committee they may think they need to vote the same way as that faculty member. The student could think this way because there could be a real or perceived risk of classroom retaliation. The researcher has interacted with students who sit on committees with faculty members and feel they were treated rudely and their input to committee work was disregarded. It is also believed not only faculty members treat student government participants this way, some administrative officers will treat them similarly.

The researcher believes when student government participants are given thorough information in order to make a decision, they will make the best decision. When students are trained well and know their role and the operations, they will ask the right questions to make an informed decision. Poor decision-making occurs in instances when students do not care about
their role or have a personal agenda. Additionally, if a less experienced group is making a
decision, it may take some time to learn how to make an informed decision.

Isolate personal bias, opinions, feelings, and intuition as a researcher. In the current
professional role of the researcher, direct advisement of student government does not occur.
This professional role distance was beneficial to eliminate bias and influence on the student
government participants of the study. It has been three years since the researcher worked at the
Associated Students where the study took place. The students who held positions in the
Associated Students during the study were not in those roles when the researcher left the
university. These students do not know the researcher, helping eliminate a perception of
authority of the researcher as a perceived advisor. Additionally, the personal bias of how
authority figures treat student government participants was isolated during study interviews as
the researcher did not provide own interpretation during the interview. Also, any bias or feelings
of the researcher that was noted in field notes or on interview transcripts by the participant was
bracketed out to get only the participant’s experience.

Limitations. The outcomes of this study reflected the experience of student government
participants from a state university in California that were in an Associated Students
organization. Due to this, the experiences of the participants may not apply to other institution
types or student government structures. Additionally, this IPA study only spoke to the
experiences of the participants in particular. The findings may not apply to the other students
who were a part of the same study site. Lastly, it is acknowledged that the participants’ decision-
making process may have been influenced over the course of the study. Due to the design of the
study, the participants were asked to reflect on their decision-making process. This by virtue
brought attention to the participant in how they approached decision-making, and they were more aware of their future decisions made while taking part during the data collection.
Chapter Four: Findings and Analysis

The purpose of this Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) study was to explore how undergraduate student government participants at a state university in California engage in decision-making in their official roles. After analysis of interview transcripts and participant journal entries, four superordinate themes and seventeen sub-themes emerged. The themes were determined through thematic network analysis technique building a network of basic themes, organizing themes, and global themes (Attrike-Stirling, 2001). The case-by-case analysis technique used in IPA methodology described in Chapter Three was applied. Each individual case represented one participant’s words where themes emerged to address the purpose of the study to explore how these student government participants engaged in decision-making in their role. Each participant’s themes became the basic themes in the thematic network analysis (Attrike-Stirling, 2001). These basic themes were then analyzed further and grouped together to create organizing themes (Attrike-Stirling, 2001). The organizing themes became the overall sub-themes within the data representation. The sub-themes were analyzed and grouped together to produce four global themes within the thematic network analysis (Attrike-Stirling, 2001). These global themes became the four superordinate themes presented in the data.

Summarization of the four superordinate themes and their sub-themes are represented in Table 2.

Table 2: Theme Summarization

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Superordinate Theme 1: Student Representation</th>
<th>Sub-themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The participants' purpose of their role and how it impacted their approach to decision-making.</td>
<td>1.1: <em>Student Voice</em>: Represent and deliver the entire student body's perspective to the university administration.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.2: <em>Interacting with Students</em>: How participants gained student perspective to provide the student voice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.3: <em>Impact on Students</em>: The result from providing student voice in interaction with university administration.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1.4: <em>Role Responsibility</em>: How the participants viewed their job duties to fulfill their purpose of student representation.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Superordinate Theme 2: Experience in Role

Contributed to the participants' perceived ability of fulfilling their position duties and their understanding of the decision-making process.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-themes</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.1: <em>Valuable Experience</em>: Addresses the various positive experiences the participants encountered in their role.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2: <em>Negative Experiences</em>: Addresses the various negative experiences the participants encountered in their role.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3: <em>Interaction with Professionals</em>: Addresses the participants' perceptions of how the professional staff, faculty and administration interacted with them in their role.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4: <em>Board Dynamics</em>: How the participants perceived the Board of Directors members interacting with each other and how it affected their experience in their role.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5: <em>No Difficult Decisions</em>: How the participants perceived not encountering difficult or controversial decisions in their official voting roles and how it affected their experience in their role.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Superordinate Theme 3: Approach to Decision-Making

Provided context about how the participants' own perspectives and various influences on their perspectives affected their decision-making.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3.1: <em>Be Informed</em>: Explained how the participants gained information to make decisions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2: <em>Having Conversations</em>: Described how the participants would talk through decisions with others to be better informed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3: <em>Looking Back and Looking Forward</em>: How the participants learned historical information about current issues, and how they looked forward to how their decisions would impact students and the organization after they left their position.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4: <em>Influence</em>: Explained how external influences perceived by the participants affected their decision-making.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5: <em>Grappling with Identities</em>: Showed how the participants' internal influence and perceptions of their own identities and identities of others affected their decision-making.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Superordinate Theme 4: Importance of Reflection

Explained how the participants made sense of their role as decision-maker through increased awareness of their actions and thoughts in the decision-making process.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4.1: <em>Everyone Should Reflect</em>: How the participants advised that everyone on the Board of Directors should reflect on influences and experiences that ultimately effected decision-making.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2: <em>Gained from Reflection</em>: Highlighted realizations the participants made during reflection leading to new perspectives about their actions and decisions in their experience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3: <em>Learned from Participation</em>: Described how each participant learned something new through participating in the research study.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Subordinate Theme 1: Student Representation

For these participants, Student Representation signified the main purpose of their role in student governance. The purpose of the participants’ role directly impacted how they approached their decision-making. The participants had to fulfill the duties of their respective roles to accomplish their overall purpose. Through interacting with students to gain perspective, they provided the student voice in student representation. The student voice they provided had direct impact on the student body. The expected impact on students affected how they approached their decision-making. They wanted to ensure their actions had a positive or beneficial impact on the student body.

Four sub-themes make up the first superordinate theme. The Student Voice sub-theme addressed how these participants delivered the overall student body perspective to the university administration. The sub-theme of Interacting with Students provided evidence of how they gained student perspective to provide the student voice. The sub-theme Impact on Students was the result from providing the student voice as student government representatives in interaction with university administration. The Role Responsibility sub-theme addressed how students viewed their job duties to fulfill the purpose of their role.

Student voice. All five participants expressed student voice as a primary contributor to overall student representation. The Student Voice sub-theme fits into the overall superordinate theme of Student Representation in that the participants’ roles are to be the representative voice of all 14,000 students at the study site. These participants represented all the students, speaking for those who could not speak for themselves as a part of impactful university-wide decision-making. Discussion through all participant experiences provided the significance of role as
Student Voice. Beginning with Isabel, who discussed what being the student voice in student representation meant to her.

Being a student government representative is basically no matter what role you have, whether you're the rep of one college or another, your role in general is to be the student voice and to reach out to all these students. You have a big responsibility to advocate for the students.

Isabel saw the meaning of the role of a student government representative to be the student voice. Isabel stressed the responsibility that a student government representative had in being that student voice for all constituents.

Zack viewed the entire Board of Directors, comprising the executive officers and student representatives, as “the student voice of the campus.” He went on to explain his understanding of student government representation, “the way I interpret student government representatives after my time here, and especially my time comparing our AS towards the ASs across the system, is that we're here to be the student voice.” He also said, “We are here to give a lot of opinion.” Zack believed the student representatives were there to give forward perspective of the needs of the student body to the administration.

Scott understood what it meant to be a student government representative as “being a voice for the students on campus,” stating it’s about “communicating with them [students] about what they want to see, and then actually trying to do something to make those changes.” Scott further understood student government representation to be the student voice, with it “being the link between the student body and the administration, or the faculty.”

Jay frequently talked about his experience of serving as the student voice on university committees.
Every committee is important and one thing I feel like is a majority of committees is usually faculty and staff. By being a student voice on the committee usually faculty and staff look at us and they'll say, "Oh you're a student, how do you feel?" Being able to be well-informed and have an opinion, whether it’s the same or different from the rest, just being able to voice your opinion and being able to give them reasons why.

Jay saw importance in being that voice for students and offering opinion in their place. He also had the experience of being asked for the student body’s opinion by faculty and staff on committees.

Sometimes the school wants to do things, and certain populations and groups of people might be ignored, or might feel like they're ignored, if certain policies were in place. So, just being like a student voice, and that person that says, "We need to think about things instead of just jumping the gun."

The example Jay provided about speaking up in a committee with faculty and staff illustrated how a student representative provides the student voice on an issue.

Lastly, Paul went further into the bigger picture of the meaning behind student voice. Paul discussed shared governance and his interpretation of what it meant to him. Paul believed student voice to be the act of participation in shared governance.

I have been constantly learning in my time in AS in what shared governance is. To be a student government representative, it's to have that student voice at the tables where you can have the most impact. Where the insight a student provides could change what the direction the university would go. To have that student voice I think has been one of the key components of the student government representative role ... To have that voice; is to
carry that voice of the 14,000 students on this campus to those tables\(^1\) to make sure that we're being represented and we're being advocated for in the best possible way.

The participants saw their role as a student government representative to provide student voice when interacting with faculty, staff and administration. Providing student voice was a component within the purpose of their role as student representatives. To provide an accurate representation of the student voice, the participants had to interact with students.

**Interacting with students.** The second sub-theme in *Student Representation* is *Interacting with Students*. It was evident to participants that interactions with students had to take place for them to better provide the student voice. Hearing about issues directly from students strengthened their ability to accurately embody the entirety of the student perspective. All five participants discussed the way they interacted with students while acting in their role as student government participants. Depending on their position on the Board of Directors, whether student representative or executive officer, the experiences differed in how student interaction took place.

Jay shared his experience of interacting with students as having taken place in several ways. He interacted with his constituents through events he set up for them “to get them more engaged,” stating, at these events, “I let them know who I am, let them know that I am able to meet with the [college] Dean so any problems they may have where they are like really concerned about the graduation rate or ability to perform well in the classroom setting, I let them know or where they can get help.” Jay also interacted with students through his required office hours. During office hours “some of my constituents, they usually come meet with me during AS hours they usually know I'm there Monday through Friday, so they sometimes stop by if they

\(^1\) By “tables”, Paul is referring to the campus committees, made of faculty, staff and administration, in which he participated.
have a quick question.” Jay continued, the main way he interacted with students, “I get around to them ... I usually like being out and about on campus.” Being present on campus allowed him to could have conversations with students who “might have a pressing issue that they might not feel would be anything big to bring up” or “we might be talking about things that might be going on in the college. Whether it's new minors turning into majors, and they might have concerns about that depending on the length of their time in college.” Jay would talk to his constituents in any way he could reach them.

Scott discussed his interactions with students as two separate types, one being with his constituents in the college he represented, and secondly with the whole student body. Within the college Scott represented, he tabled in a central location accessible to his constituents. He held his required office hours in his college and talked with them about certain issues. The issue he referred to in his example was the increased fee referendum the Associated Students put to a student body vote in the fall semester. “I've asked students what they think about it, and they're all against it. I explain to them what it's about, and they're still kind of against it, but not really.” In these student interactions, he was soliciting opinions on an issue to represent the students as their voice. He explained the interactions with his college constituents to occur “fairly often, just because all of my friends are also my constituents, and I bring up what I do to just the people I interact with on the day-to-day.” Here, Scott interacted frequently with students he represented. Regarding his experience interacting with the whole student body, he shared the following:

I've done a little bit of tabling, not too often, just once or twice. I like to reach out to random people, but I don't really know if they're my constituents because they might not be in my college if they're just walking by the quad or something. Anytime that I'm interacting with students, they're all really appreciative of what we're doing tabling-wise.
Usually we give them free stuff, so it's hard not to appreciate it. Just when I talk to students, too, I feel like they're listening, and that I can help them understand things a little better too.

The interactions Scott had with students included talking with them through formal tabling or casual encounters.

On the contrary, Isabel did not have as positive and rewarding student interactions as Jay and Scott reported.

Sometimes, I just randomly mention that I'm part of AS and my role as a representative. Then usually people are like, "Oh, that's cool." Then sometimes that's it, but there have been times where people have told me about really old instances where they've had problems with inclusion that I can't really do anything because it happened two or three years ago. I think that's pretty much it. It's just me casually saying that I'm in that role, but nothing really has happened or no one has said anything besides, "Oh, that's pretty cool."

Isabel showed she was interacting with students and explained her role, but the response from students was uniformed.

Paul shared how he interacted with students. He used conversation to discover issues from students. He took the stories he heard from students to share their voice when he represented them at campus meetings. The stories provided him with a more diverse perspective, given the wider representation of the student body.

Really, I always talk to them about issues. I don't really see it as me saying, "Well, there's this tuition increase. What do you think about it?" It's more so, "Tell me about you. Tell me about what responsibilities are you juggling?" From that, I kind of learn a little bit.
It's very simple. I never really approach it as, "Okay, I should talk with constituents and ask them about a certain issue." It's really just asking the very basic questions that'll bring up the issue anyway. It's helpful to know the stories, to know my experience doesn't obviously count for all of them. I can pull from my experience, but it's better to pull from people who have come from different backgrounds. That's my interaction with the constituents, in a nutshell.

Lastly, Zack discussed how he approached interacting with students, sharing “the easiest way that I've communicated with students is through social media outlets that AS puts out.” He continued, “I noticed the best way for us to address any students is to advertise that we may be holding like a town hall or an open forum, or some kind of event.” Zack pointed to this as the best way to communicate with the students because he believed they will attend an event if they are interested in the topic. In Zack’s opinion, “the students aren’t necessarily going to hear what you're saying if they're not interested in the topic.” He approached interacting with students by “trying to keep everything as simple as possible because a lot of the things that are happening on the campus may seem confusing if the students aren't aware of what happens on the campus.”

As part of their student government responsibilities, the study participants were required to regularly interact with their constituents. These interactions with the student body increased the participants’ ability to provide the overall voice of students. Learning from their constituents led the participants to be more informed about their decisions that impact the student body.

**Impact on students.** The third sub-theme within *Student Representation* is **Impact on Students.** The work the participants strived for in representing students was to have a positive and beneficial impact on all students. Three participants shared that **Impact on Students** was an
important part of representing students. Beginning with Jay, who spoke about being part of a university committee and how he saw the work of the committee impacting students.

This committee has committed itself to research at a system wide and campus level to see what we are doing to impact students in a positive way and make sure we retain everyone. We really couldn't run through ideas and vote on anything but this committee I'm excited about the great work we will do.

Jay felt excited about the work the committee would be doing. He emphasized what the committee decided will ultimately have a positive impact on students.

Paul also discussed how sitting on a committee will impact students. I sit on an academic policy committee and I see how that role is very important in terms of saying this is how it would impact students the most, we've worked on a lot of policies that would directly impact students and then directly benefit for students. Something like a faculty hiring or a faculty tenure committee, that doesn't impact us the most. I mean, it has an impact in terms of who will be teaching us but we don't have the biggest expertise, we don't really know what that means but something that talks about the creation of certain classes or departments, that's something that'll definitely impact students a lot more heavily than who gets promoted and who does not. Students should be a part of that conversation. That's how I go about making my decisions in this role, it's just thinking will this have the most beneficial impact on students.

Paul saw the work of the committee he sat on directly impacting students. Paul also perceived creation of classes to be a beneficial impact. He did not think that having a student be part of conversations about faculty hiring or promotion is something as necessary due to lack of student expertise on the subject. But, he did say that the decision of who would be teaching a course
would eventually impact students. Paul emphasized how beneficial impact on students is part of his decision-making process.

Scott similarly discussed the impact of his decisions as part of his decision-making process, stating “I always have to weigh the decision and decide, is this going to impact the students in a positive way or not, as a whole?” Scott referred to positive impact on students similarly to how both Jay and Paul discussed it in their experiences.

The actions of Jay, Paul and Zach in their role as a student representative, as well as actions and decisions of their committee work, directly impacted students on their campus. These three participants wanted the overall impact on students to be positive. The direct result from the role responsibility of student representation from sharing the student voice was policy impacting the students. To fully embody the role of a student representative, the participants had a duty to fulfill specific responsibilities.

**Role responsibility.** The final sub-theme of Student Representation is Role Responsibility. The idea of Role Responsibility ties into the superordinate theme of Student Representation based on how these participants performed their duties. Role Responsibility addresses what participants perceived their responsibilities were in order to fulfill their role of representing students. Three participants discussed how their Role Responsibility applied to Student Representation. As these students were also members of a Board of Directors of a corporation, there were two tracks of Role Responsibility, student government representative duties and Board of Directors’ duties. Paul and Zack talked about student government representative responsibilities.
Both Paul and Zack were executive officers of the Board of Directors. As executive officers, they were compensated with a salary\(^2\). Paul discussed how this element of his position affected how he viewed his representative responsibilities. In the example he provided, Paul discussed a time when students were protesting and wanted him to them.

I'm in this role to represent all of them, not just the majority. They pay for me to represent them as well so the best I can do is to provide an arena for discussion or debate between those students. I don't necessarily have to be there protesting with them and making a clear sound on what my beliefs are but what can I do to bring as many students into the fold, to voice their opinions. How can I best serve, engage and empower them to have their own beliefs out there? They pay me to represent them at every possible opportunity and I think in having the opportunity for conversation, I think I did that well to represent them all.

In Paul’s example of student representative responsibility, he saw his responsibility to represent all students, not just the students he may have agreed with in the protest.

Zack discussed how he re-evaluated the purpose of his role as a student representative.

I think my role is more to analyze the university and see where AS can partner with the university to make things better and make things more efficient for the student. I wish I had known that, that my role is more to represent the students and find what they may want, and then address that to the campus and to my advisors.

In this excerpt from Zack, he looked at how he had a responsibility to represent the students. He also saw his role as requiring him to find ways for AS to partner with the university.

\(^2\) The executive officers at this Associated Students are paid via a student fee in which the Associated Students operating budget is comprised.
Differences in role responsibilities between student representatives and executive officers were revealed when Isabel, Paul and Zack discussed their specific responsibilities. Isabel talked about a vote that took place in a Board of Directors meeting in which the executive officers were asking for more authority to make changes on behalf of the whole Board with a planned expansion of Associated Students.

The first action item was about the AS expansion asking to designate the Executive Committee authority regarding the legal and restructure changes that would happen during this future expansion. As the Board of Directors, our main responsibility is to represent the students and not really deal with changing codes or other legal matters. I agreed that our main concern as BOD should be serving the students and not have to worry about approving code changes especially since we do not have that much knowledge regarding the legal side of AS. The Execs have more experience and knowledge on that part so it felt right that they should deal with that during Exec meetings. The outcome was we all agreed to approve the action to give the Executives that authority.

She saw her role as a Board of Directors member was to be a student representative and not to worry about the legal aspects of the corporation. Isabel said the executive officers had more experience and knowledge about the corporation.

Paul also talked about the vote to expand authority to the executive officers and how he viewed the responsibility differences.

On our Board of Directors, a vote was taken to allow the Executive Officers to make decisions on behalf of the Board in regards to the expansion of AS. Most of the decisions that will need to be made will be time-sensitive and dealing with legal matters, according
to our Executive Director. There was a bit of concern from our Board members regarding the scope of authority and what will need to be taken to the Board for final approval. I see this action as simply making the expansion process simpler and more efficient. It would also be an inappropriate use of the representatives' time to have them focus and debate about internal AS operations, when all of their efforts should be focused towards student advocacy and representation.

Like Isabel, Paul thought the responsibilities of the student representatives was to focus their time on student advocacy and not focus on internal operations of the corporation.

Zack saw his role as an executive officer to be “more of the business operations.” He got “to sit in on a lot of the business operation decisions” such as “budget, pay increases for professional staff, different things like that.” He saw the responsibility as “not making a lot of big decisions, but give a lot of input from the student side when it comes to the business side of the organization.” Additionally, he got “to learn a lot about the way a non-profit organization runs” which was an added benefit to the role.

Zack also discussed the difference of responsibilities between executive officers and student representatives.

The Board members are here to represent their college, and that's what they should be spending their five hours a week doing is representing their college. Where the reporting lines of the executive officers are going isn't really in their job title. I totally see them as being the Board of Directors of the corporation. That's why anything has to get approved by them, and they can provide feedback on it, but their titles are the student representatives at large for their specific college. I think the majority of their time they should be doing is representing them. While they are representing them in approving any
changes to the organization, I think the big decision-making picture falls on more of the professional staff and more of the execs, because they may understand the organization more.

Zack provided his view that the responsibilities of student representatives should have been to represent the student constituents. The responsibilities of the daily corporation duties should have fallen on the executive officers, while the student representatives had to approve any major changes to the corporation.

The participants defined Role Responsibility for the student representatives to be speaking for their constituents. The focus of executive officers was to fulfill their duties of representing students along with taking care of the corporation’s internal operations. Through defining Role Responsibility, the participants could fulfill their overall purpose of Student Representation.

Conclusions. The superordinate theme of Student Representation explained how the five participants expressed what it meant for them to fulfill the purpose of their role. Student Voice was an important component of Student Representation as it is how the participants advocated for the student body. Acting as voice for students was meant to be a form of advocacy, to speak up for those students who could not express their voice. Examples of advocacy work presented in the findings were instances of university committee meetings where only one or a few student representatives were present to be the voice of all students. The participants had to be comfortable speaking up to express their opinion about issues relating to students. The student representatives gave the overall student perspective at the appropriate tables with faculty, staff and administration within the shared governance process. The student voice was not just that of a few select student groups, but of the entire student body. The number of students that these
student government representatives spoke for in university committees and beyond showed the magnitude of the responsibility these participants held.

*Interacting with Students* was another important function in *Student Representation* for these participants. Whether it was connecting with their specific constituents or the entire student body, these participants had to make effort to engage with the students to fulfill part of their role duties. Much of the time spent interacting with students was through conversations. With Scott’s experience talking about the fee increase with constituents, he did not seem to think the students cared too much about the fee increase, or at least not enough to discuss it further with him. He felt they appreciated the interaction to understand the issue better, but the students could have been appreciating the free giveaways more than the discussion. In Isabel’s experience, she approached talking to students casually and they only said, “oh that’s cool.” She did not gain any insight from students by informing them about her role on the Board of Directors which meant that she was unable to converse significantly with students. Zack approached interacting with students through simple messaging to get information disseminated. If he talked directly with a student, he kept it issue-based as he expressed the feeling that the student must be interested in a certain topic to engage in conversation. Paul considered interacting with students being conversation-based as the best approach. The conversations led to issues or questions surfacing from the student. Paul also used what he learned in the conversations as examples he shared in meetings to provide a more diverse representation of the students’ perception. *Interacting with Students* gave the participants information and stories to share when representing the student body, but did not have comprehensive influence on decision-making, as the experiences the participants had in their interactions were widely variable.
The Impact on Students as an emergent sub-theme was an important factor in the participants’ decision-making in their role in Student Representation. They strived to have positive impact on students through their advocacy efforts. Sitting on university committees was one way that the participants saw impact on students. Jay experienced sitting on a committee in which he admired the research work the committee had done to make decisions that would have positive direct impact on students. Paul observed that the decisions made on committees had indirect impact on students. In the example Paul gave about faculty hiring decisions, he felt it was not necessary for students to be part of those decisions. However, he did see the final decision of faculty hiring could impact students as they would be teaching the students in classes.

The participants wanted their decisions to impact the students beneficially and not affect them negatively, so the Impact on Students was a significant factor in their decision-making.

Role Responsibility was also a component of Student Representation which affected how the participants approached their duties. The participants were members of a Board of Directors for a non-profit auxiliary corporation, but they were also student government representatives. Through the participants’ discussions about their responsibilities, the findings showed that there was complexity within their position duties, which reflected in conflict about where authority lies in certain decisions. The participants all saw their responsibility to represent all students, but some also had a responsibility to run a corporation meant for serving the student body. Funding for the corporation comes from fees from the student body. The fees make up the entire operating budget of the Associated Students Corporation. The executive officers’ compensation came from this operating budget and the student representatives used money from the budget to put on events for student constituents. The executive officers saw their role responsibilities as
running a corporation, but simultaneously worried about ensuring that student representation was taking place.

The experiences these five participants expressed about Student Representation define the purpose of their role. They had to engage with students to gain insight to provide student perspective at the university level which would create the most positive impact on all students. The task was not small and each participant had several experiences while fulfilling their role. Superordinate theme two will discuss the Experience in Role from the five participants.

**Subordinate Theme 2: Experience in Role**

For these participants, their Experience in Role contributed to their perceived ability to fulfill their required duties and make decisions. These participants were in their role for nine months. Within that time, they were having positive and negative experiences, learning new skills, growing as a student leader, and having personal experiences with professional staff and fellow Board members. The types of experiences they encountered while acting in their role contributed to their understanding of the decision-making process as a Board of Directors member.

The Experience in Role superordinate theme yielded five sub-themes – Valuable Experience, Negative Experiences, Interaction with Professionals, Board Dynamics, and No Difficult Decisions. The sub-theme of Valuable Experience addresses the various positive experiences the participants encountered in their role. Negative Experiences surfaced as a sub-theme for some participants. A sub-theme of Interaction with Professionals addresses the participants' perceptions of how the professional staff, faculty and administration interacted with them in their role. The Board Dynamics sub-theme addresses how the Board of Directors members interacted with each other. The experience of not encountering difficult or
controversial decisions in their official voting roles was prominent among all five participants, and is discussed in the No Difficult Decisions sub-theme.

**Valuable experience.** The Valuable Experience sub-theme for the participants provides evidence their perception of their overall experience in their role contributed to their decision-making approach. Through several attributes of their experiences that were mentioned, these participants could perform their responsibilities. Jay, Paul, Scott and Zack all mentioned different valuable elements their experience provided them. Among the Valuable Experience attributes was learning experience. Zack and Jay discussed how they saw their experience in their role as a learning experience. The learning which took place varied between them. Zack shared what he learned from his experience in his role.

To this point, it's been interesting definitely, a big learning experience. I think the biggest thing that I've taken away from it is an appreciation for the staff members and the admin that as a normal student, you're never going to really get to know or understand what it is exactly that they do. I think it's been a good experience for sure because I'll be able to graduate college and have a better appreciation for what the university does than just being a normal student.

Zack learned a different perspective for what staff members and administrators did in their roles to run the university.

Jay explained his learning experiences to be about learning from the duties of his position.

I suppose learning a lot of things from the experiences that I've been having on different committees. Also, the work you have to put in; whether it's planning events or even being a part of other people’s events, you get to learn from things like mistakes, successes, and
the failures, they help teach us a lot. Learning that things don't take a day to complete ... you gotta have some months in advance or months even afterwards cause it takes even longer than that to sometimes see some results. So that's what I learned, is just understanding patience and learning to love what you do so you know it's gonna be change in the future.

Jay learned from his experience having served on committees and by planning events. He learned how to plan ahead of time to execute events. He also learned that he would not see results immediately in his advocacy work on committees. He came to see that patience was important to appreciate incremental progress on the impact he worked toward.

Another attribute of Valuable Experience was empowerment. Both Scott and Zack shared they felt empowered. Scott shared how the experience in the role was empowering to him.

I really try to take it seriously because I'm representing people, but it's also been pretty empowering. I've enjoyed it, and it's made me feel like I have a lot of agency on campus, and what I do actually makes a difference, which I wasn't expecting at all because I heard that you can't really make a difference anyway from some of the people that were on the Board last year. I think I've proved them somewhat wrong. I feel like I make a difference in stuff.

Scott felt what he did in his role made a difference on campus, an outcome in which he was not expecting. His experience of empowerment came from having “agency on campus.”

Similarly, Zack also felt empowerment within his role in the “decision-making process,” stating, “I feel pretty informed and I feel really empowered.” When he made a decision, he felt “everyone around me really hears that and respects it, and takes it seriously.”
Further, another attribute of Valuable Experience Paul and Zack both had was the feeling of reward and fulfillment. Both Paul and Zack expressed how either a part of their experience or the overall experience in their role had been rewarding. Paul talked about the totality of his experience and how he viewed it as rewarding.

I think it's been an informative and rewarding year in the role. It's been filled with a lot of growth as a student, as a leader. I think I have done well in terms of the responsibilities of the role. There are things I wish I could have done better, more efficiently, but in terms of sticking to the role and its responsibilities, I think I have done well.

Paul thought back to the experiences of his role. He found he had grown from his experience and felt that he fulfilled the responsibilities of his role. Upon reminiscence, he found the experience rewarding.

Zack talked about a rewarding experience from his role.

Before this year, I had never written a code [Codes of Governance], so I would be lost when it comes to the format and wording without my staff members. Changes to codes have been very painless to say the least, but have been rewarding and make all members on Exec feel like we are accomplishing meaningful tasks.

In this example, Zack discussed his experience with writing a code for the Codes of Governance, a main governing document for the corporation. Writing the code changes and having them approved was rewarding in Zack’s experience.

A final trait of the Valuable Experience that was shared by Scott and Zack was the feeling of preparedness. Scott gave a general account of how he felt prepared for his role.

I feel like I got pretty well-prepared just from the trainings and stuff we did. The retreat was a big help, so all the stuff that I did learn from AS, I definitely appreciate that
knowledge because I've used a lot of it in my role so far. I feel like I really got well prepared from the trainings and the retreat.

Scott went on to talk specifically about being prepared about the increased fee referendum through early and frequent conversation on the topic.

I've been hearing about this since the first time we met with AS, from the AS leadership. They didn't really tell us all about it, but they mentioned there's this fee referendum thing, and I've just been hearing chitchat about it ever since. They brought it up to us a bunch of times at our trainings and stuff, just telling us what it's about.

Zack also spoke about feeling prepared about the increased fee referendum from early discussions. He described how he first learned about the issue from the Executive Director of Associated Students.

We had our first training, and it was just so much information at one time. Everything was right over my head, because I didn't know. He was saying all these terms that I had never heard. Then he started talking to me about the fee referendum and how we need to raise the fee. I understood what he was saying. We don't have enough money to continue our programs. As my training went on and I learned more about the budget and I learned more about the history of everything I really started to understand how we didn't have enough money to sustain our current operations and build any new ones.

When Zack started in his role he was given information he did not understand at first. The more he learned about the operations of the organization, the history of the budget, and the proposed increased fee referendum the more he felt prepared to take action. He then shared this training with the rest of the Board of Directors to prepare them.
The various attributes the participants mentioned contribute to the perception that their service has been a *Valuable Experience*. Whether they learned something new, gained a feeling of empowerment, felt a sense of reward, or felt prepared for the job, these participants attributed these occurrences to their overall perception of *Valuable Experience*.

**Negative Experiences.** Similar to the *Valuable Experience*, some participants encountered *Negative Experiences* within their role. These *Negative Experiences* also contributed to the individual’s perception of their role, and affected their approach to decision-making in their official capacity. Three participants, Isabel, Scott and Jay indicated that they had at least one or more negative experiences within their role. The sub-theme of *Negative Experiences* was particularly prevalent for Isabel. She described how she felt about being the only student representative on a committee.

As the only student representative out of the group full of faculty and staff, I was not sure if I even had the authority to say anything since a majority of the action items are towards faculty and staff. My purpose and position in the committee is still unclear to me. I have talked to our chair [of the committee] to clarify some things and to provide some background to why this committee was established, but even with all my questions answered, a lot of things still do not make sense to me, which is why I find it troubling and a little frustrating for me to make any decisions or voice my input in this committee, being the only student. I do not feel as if I have a voice on this committee as the student representative. I am not sure how I can represent the students in this committee because I do not know what students would want.

In the example Isabel provided, she did not feel she had authority to speak up in the committee. She was unsure how to best represent students in this situation. Isabel further discussed how in
the beginning of her position she felt she was not prepared. She reiterated her feelings on being the only student in a room of faculty. “It was also different for me to be in a room filled with just faculty, being the only student. I'm not really used to that yet.” The process of preparation Isabel described for sitting on committees was minimal. “When they were assigning committees, no one really tells you what actually happens at committees. They're like, ‘Oh, you have to do committees’ I'm like, ‘Okay’.” In sum, the experiences Isabel had sitting on committees were negative.

Isabel had negative experiences in her role that were related to perceiving a lack of guidance and of feeling she was not heard. She talked about not feeling empowered.

I have the freedom to do what I want with this role but at the same time there's so much I don't know what to do. It took me a while to figure out what I wanted to do, to come up with an actual goal. That's pretty much it. I feel like it's [guidance] not really there. I still feel like my ideas aren't really accounted for. It makes me feel less empowered. Which is kind of a little weird I guess is the word. We're all for empowering the students and serving and engaging, that's our values. It's weird to see it not being reflected on the Board. I feel like the execs, they have their own agenda and goals. Sometimes I feel like they're so busy doing what they want to do that they don't really reach out to the rest of the Board. I feel like they're already set on certain things. When we have questions, or concerns it doesn't feel like they're listening to us.

Isabel was not the only participant who had negative experiences in their role; Scott shared some examples he experienced, “There's kind of the gossipy side of AS, from the execs and the Board members.” The “gossip” he heard was “unofficially off the table” about what “the advisors think about stuff.” This “gossip” changed how he viewed the advisors, explaining, “I
feel like there's a lot of hesitation from the advisors, kind of, ‘you shouldn't do that,’ is how I feel.” Scott went on to say the advisors “don't say that,” but he felt “like they kind of indirectly communicate that.” Scott felt it was a negative experience to hear unprofessional communication from advisors; it was pervasive and dulled his trust in the process.

Jay also had a negative experience he shared regarding working with other student representatives.

I can tell we're not all the same. And that's good, because you see the different passions and everything comes to the surface, but at the same time it's like funny, sometimes even though you're in group it feels like its solo work. So, I might have passions in one area, but I also might have a co-rep who loves another area. And I might have another co-rep who is more geared towards something else ... different initiatives that aren't on the same page as mine. During that, it sort of feels like you're alone in the field that you're in.

In this example that Jay, discussed how he felt alone in the work he did because there were different passions each representative had. Jay felt isolated in his work because even though his fellow representatives work together, they each focus on different goals, which contributed to feeling alone in his advocacy work.

For the participants who had negative experiences, their accounts generated further evidence that types of experiences shaped how they felt in certain situations within their role. Those who did not have positive experiences felt it affected their feelings towards their responsibilities. Having a lack of guidance, dealing with indirect communication methods such as gossip, and feeling alone in their work affected their overall experience as a student representative. *Negative Experiences*, like positive experiences, affected how they perceived themselves as decision-makers in their official capacity.
**Interaction with professionals.** The sub-theme of *Interaction with Professionals* was another element that added to the overall *Experience in Role*. The interactions the participants’ encountered helped shape how they perceived their role and how they carried out their responsibilities. The effect of interaction with professionals was expressed by Zack, Scott and Jay. The professionals included staff members, such as the advisors to the Board of Directors, faculty members on committees, and administrators such as a College Dean or the President of the University. Zack attributed the manifestation of many of the students’ ideas to the work of the professional staff.

Then the professional staff and the administration are the ones who actually get it done, because they're here year to year after the students leave. I can only do so much in my nine months in school that I can give a lot of feedback on where the campus should go. Then I think when I leave it's up to the professional staff and the administration who stay here every year to year to get those ideas to come through. It's an odd thing, student government. I'm surprised people really get anything done. That's why I say it falls on the pro staff every year. You look across the CSU of the ASs who are getting all these amazing things done, and the president and the executive officers are getting all these accolades. In my mind, I'm like, "really go look at what pro staff are actually behind there doing the majority of the work year to year."

Zack thought the professional staff were the people doing the work of implementing the students’ initiatives as they work year to year at the institution. The students were only in their role for a short time and had ideas the professional staff continued to execute after the students who started them move on. He went on to comment on qualities he viewed as good for a staff member or advisor to have in terms of guidance and training.
I think the staff are there to provide guidance in the start. Right when you come in your role obviously you need a lot of training, and they're the first ones to go to with any questions. Then I think a really good advisor needs to let you roll on your own and let you try to do it on your own. If you fail, that's fine. That's what the staff is there to make sure that the organization doesn't go crumbling downhill, but I think a good staff member definitely gives as much freedom as the student leader wants, because they let me take things and do them completely on my own. Then I just come back for questions if I have any.

In Zack’s experience, he received initial training from his advisors and then they pulled back to let him take the experience into his own hands.

Scott had mixed experiences in his interactions with professionals. He had an idea to get summer student employees a full-time parking pass for campus and he shared what his experience was like in working on this idea with his advisors.

The advisors aren't super on-board. They're always kind of advocating for the other side, like, "Well, maybe we should charge ridiculous fees to these student employees. Maybe they deserve to have that." It's like, why? I understand trying to see both sides, but it just feels a little biased. I feel like getting the free parking passes is supposed to quiet us down.

The free parking pass Scott referred to in this excerpt was the parking pass the Board of Directors receive for their service. Scott wanted all student employees during the summer to receive a parking pass, not just the students in Associated Students. He expressed that he felt the parking pass he received for free was supposed to silence the request for parking passes for all students. A contrasting experience Scott had with professional staff related to the help he
received planning an event he coordinated. “All the advisors have been really great with helping us with our event plan, really supportive there.” He did say in general “I do feel that I am being heard.” Scott highlighted his interaction with one professional staff as being respectful.

She is a very good listener and always goes out of her way to understand what I am trying to say even if I fumble the words around a bit. I do feel that there is a respectful relationship, which also has the added quality of attentiveness. I know that she cares very much about what we are up to because she always follows up.

Jay shared his general interactions with faculty, staff and administration were positive. It was just like you can learn anything from anyone at AS if you just take the time to talk to them and the faculty and staff too, they always have a smile and a pat on the back to say go be great. They are always encouraging in a caring sort of way too, so it’s like a little family here.

He talked further about the experience with interacting with the Dean of the college he represented.

We try to reach out to our dean at least once every month. She is one of the most ready to work people I have met. My dean really values a student voice and allows our ideas to push forth and she loves to build on and provide insight to how we can make things better. When we were talking about things such as the food pantry for all students we even formulated ideas to help students in our college who may be scared to come forward.

Jay met with his College Dean frequently. He thought she was easy to work with and had the interest of students at the forefront.
The Interaction with Professionals these participants experienced provided more perspective into the scope their role and how the roles of the professional staff intersect with their plans and programs. Through interactions, they gained perspective on practicalities of how tasks are accomplished in their organization. They also talked about their perceptions of the professional staff as variable, coming off as biased, supportive, or easy to work with on completing their responsibilities.

**Board dynamics.** The fourth sub-theme within *Experience in Role, Board Dynamics* adds to the participants’ overall experience in their roles through the various interactions they had among themselves. The perceptions of intra-Board of Directors interactions contributed to how they felt fulfilling their role responsibilities. Zack, Scott and Jay discussed the interactions between themselves and the other Board of Directors members. Zack felt the Board was “doing a good job.” He discussed how he thought the Board was accomplishing the responsibilities of their duties by reaching their goals together. He went further to talk about how the Board dynamics played into the overall satisfaction of “doing a good job.” Zack said, “our Board does nothing but help each other.” He mentioned the professional staff told him they “got a lucky year of a Board that gets along with each other.”

Scott also shared the similar sentiments about Board members getting along. He said he felt “pretty comfortable with my team there” and “we all get along really well, I think.” Scott thought “everything is going well” and “our Board of Directors team works well together and makes unanimous decisions despite having different points of view.” He went further into talking about interacting with his fellow Board members.

I feel like I have good working relationships with all of my fellow Board members, especially the executives (since I spend more time discussing ASI business with them,
whereas I tend to socialize more with the other reps). I think the BOD is a really good environment for decision making, everyone is respectful and listens very closely to each other’s concerns.

In this excerpt, Scott talked about the positive work and social relationships he had with the other Board members. He also described the interactions in this environment as being “really good” for decision-making.

Like Scott, Jay also discussed how he observed the other Board members having different viewpoints. In this example, Jay talked about how he was surprised about the dynamics, and how they got along with each other.

Some of them surprise me. It’s so many different viewpoints and things at AS and some of them will surprise me in the fact that how, in a weird way, like how civil, I don’t know if that's the correct phrase. They always maintain, they're humble, they're always really kind and I'm just like wow. It's almost like a little family because you start getting closer to the people who work around you.

The Board Dynamics and the perception of these participants about working with their fellow Board members added to their overall experience in their role. They felt everyone on the Board of Directors got along well and were helpful. The perceptions they provided regarding their interactions, illustrated they perceived as a group they were doing a good job in their roles.

No difficult decisions. The final sub-theme within the Experience in Role superordinate theme is No Difficult Decisions. The notion of No Difficult Decisions arose from all five participants commenting they have not encountered difficult decisions they have had to make in their official voting role on the Board of Directors. There were other decision-making instances the participants had to make they may have viewed as difficult, but when it came to official
action agenda items for the Board of Directors, these participants did not have trouble. Jay simply stated, “nothing that has been difficult to decide on, no strife.” He attributed the lack of difficulty to absence of requirement to learn about a subject to decide, saying “there's been nothing where I've been like I need to have more information.”

Paul provided an example of a decision that received the most discussion before a vote, but noting that it still passed unanimously. In this instance, the Board was asked to support the work of a task force by approving a resolution statement that would be released by the Associated Students.

Other than that, in terms of our Board, it hasn't been that difficult. That might have been the most difficult one and I think it received the most time of conversation even though, like I said, it's only a resolution supporting the work of someone else.

In Paul’s experience, even though this action item was discussed more than other action items, it was “only a resolution supporting the work of someone else,” and not one of the Board’s initiatives.

Zack discussed what he thought attributed to the experience of *No Difficult Decisions.*

We've had a really fortunate year where everyone has agreed with each other on everything so far. We haven't had one nay vote in the whole time, which is different. I think that just comes from a lot of training that was done over summer and a real clear understanding of what the Board is here to do.

Zack credited being prepared through trainings and role responsibility understanding to the instances of unanimous agreement when it came time to vote on official agenda items.

Isabel had a different interpretation on why there have not been any nay votes at the Board meetings.
Sometimes the meetings can be very boring. Especially because it's Friday. You don't really want to be there. Sometimes I feel like when we do have to vote on things, sometimes I feel like everyone is just saying yes to just get it over with. There hasn't really been an instance where someone has said no. There's only been one instance where someone has abstained, only because they were late when they were talking about it, so of course they didn't know anything about it.

In Isabel’s experience, the meetings were “boring” and everyone wanted to get the meeting over with because it was the end of the week. Additionally, she said “there hasn't been any super major problems or any really big decisions that we had to make, or any controversial things we had to deal with.”

Lastly, Scott’s experience of No Difficult Decisions was like other participants where nothing “too bad” was presented. However, he would have liked the opportunity to vote on something difficult.

There's not been anything that we haven't approved yet. I just don't think anyone's put anything too bad up. Everything seems pretty generally good, good ideas, so far. I'd like to vote against some things. They're not giving me a lot to work with. Yeah, I think that'd be cool. A little more drama. We all get along too well.

In addition to nothing controversial being presented, Scott thought they all got along too well to create an opportunity for him to vote in disagreement. He went on to describe meetings as only having formality action items, presentations, or information items.

Nor did I really make any decisions on anything in the BOD meeting, other than to vote affirmatively on the 3 actions items (Approval of agenda, approval of minutes, and adjournment). I decided to approve the 3 mentioned action items because they were very
simple decisions... There was no discussion of the minutes or agenda since both seemed accurate and I voted to approve adjournment because I was ready to go home! I felt that the decisions made were obvious choices, my votes were informed chiefly by common-sense.

Scott echoed Isabel’s sentiments about wanting to get the meeting over with, by moving to adjourn the meeting. The decisions he had to vote on were “common-sense” action items in his experience.

The participants’ experience of *No Difficult Decisions* was attributed to nothing hard or controversial being brought forward for an official vote. The participants also said that the lack of difficulty could have been credited to training on issues, or that they wanted to get meetings finished. This feeling of having made *No Difficult Decisions* added to the overall perception of the experience they had in their role.

**Conclusions.** The various experiences in the role and their feelings about those experiences were influential on how they perceived themselves fulfilling their duties. The *Valuable Experience* most participants perceived they encountered enhanced their positive attitude toward their role performance. Having learning experiences, feeling empowered, feeling prepared and a having a sense of reward contributed to an experience being viewed as valuable. Zack learned about the inner workings of the university which attributed to him being able to have the information to perform his duties. Jay learned practical skills such as planning-ahead and patience to see the impact he was having in his role. Both Scott and Zack felt their decisions were being heard and respected. This led to feeling empowered to make a difference. The feeling of being prepared Zack and Scott shared came from early and often discussions about an important issue in which they would later decide. Scott said the knowledge he received helped
in his role. Zack thought he needed to train the Board of Directors members early and often about the proposed increase of the fee. The preparation was done to eliminate subject ignorance that can occur when information is shared only immediately before the decision making. The overall feeling that the role was rewarding was expressed by Paul and Zack. Zack attributed the experience of changes to codes as rewarding for the executive officers. The executive officers accomplished tasks were meaningful to him. Paul felt he had grown as a student leader, which to him was rewarding. Isabel was the only participant who did not talk about any Valuable Experience.

Some of the participants felt there were Negative Experiences as well. Isabel expressed many experiences she had where she did not feel comfortable performing her role as a student representative. She did not feel prepared to be part of university committees, and she felt uneasy being the only student in a room of faculty. She felt unguided and did not feel like her perspective was heard among the executive officers and professional staff. This led to an overall feeling she could not efficiently represent students in her role. Further, Negative Experiences were expressed by Scott and Jay. Scott thought Associated Students was a place of gossip and some bias by the advisors. As the Board members all got along well, it was easy for them to talk with each other. The gossip Scott encountered swayed his perception of the professional staff advisors. Even though Scott did not hear the words “you shouldn’t do that” from his advisors, he had that perception from indirect communication and was influenced by gossip. Also, Jay felt alone in his work duties because not everyone had the same interests and had different viewpoints as him.

The Interactions with Professionals were viewed mostly positively by three participants. Zack spent time talking how much he respected the hard work the professional staff did while
acknowledging that the students received the credit. Because he learned how the corporation and the university worked, this led to further appreciation of what the professional staff did. He viewed his interactions with them as positive, and he valued how his advisors let him be a leader and stepped back to let him shine in his role. Scott felt supported in event planning and had a closer connection to one of his advisors. He did however feel quieted down through one advisor playing devil’s advocate when talking through decisions. Scott thought that by the advisor providing the other side to arguments, the advisor was biased against his own point of view. This view of Scott’s about his advisors could be related to his perception of professional staff that manifested through the gossip he experienced. Jay’s experience was positive overall. He felt encouraged to do his work by the professional staff. He experienced working with an administrator who was ready and willing to work with students. He also appreciated that the effort put in by his college Dean benefitted the students. These interactions enhanced Jay’s ability to fulfill his role responsibility to represent students.

The Board Dynamics were emphasized by three participants within their Experience in Role. Zack, Scott and Jay expressed how the members of the Board all got along. They viewed the individuals as working well together, helping each other, and being respectful. Zack saw these elements attributing to a “lucky year” on the Board. Scott discussed his experience to be comfortable and called the Board his “team.” Scott considered it a positive experience to have worked with others that he viewed as having different points of view. Jay did not expect for his fellow Board members to be so “civil” and “humble.” He talked about how working with others closely led to the Board becoming a family-like environment. Despite the many different viewpoints, Scott and Jay were both surprised at how amicable everyone was. The feeling everyone could work together well added to a valuable experience, and enabled the participants
to do their duties in their role more easily. Additionally, because the group worked well together, it was easier for them to be open to receiving information early and often to make decisions efficiently.

Lastly, all five participants indicated there were No Difficult Decisions that the Board of Directors faced in the study period. They did not think there was anything controversial or hard brought to the Board in which to vote. There were discussions about issues, but voting always concluded in agreement. One reason this happened was the students were well informed before going into the vote. In Jay’s experience, he had been given relevant information which allowed him to decide with ease. This could have been attributed to the “no surprise” approach Zack used before voting officially on an issue. Another contributing factor to No Difficult Decisions was that no one wanted to be the person to keep others at a meeting when they just wanted to go home. The time meetings were held, Friday afternoons, contributed to most committee members wanting them to end quickly, leading to more agreeable voting. Both Scott and Isabel talked about wanting to be done with the meetings. In Isabel’s experience, the combination of no controversial issues or big decisions paired with wanting to get the meeting over with created an environment to always vote in agreement.

The decision-making for each participant was impacted because of the experiences they had in their role. Each participant had their own unique experiences. As the participant went through nine months in their role, the experiences would cumulatively impact how they made decisions. As a new person in the role, learning new information and navigating new relationships, they would decide differently at the beginning of their term versus after all the lived experiences in their role at the end of their term. The decision-making approach changed
throughout the nine months. The participants’ perception of their *Experience in Role* affected how they approached their decision-making.

**Subordinate Theme 3: Approach to Decision-Making**

The *Approach to Decision-Making* superordinate theme gives context for what it means to these participants considering how they made decisions. The different approaches they used showed how each participants’ own perspectives guided their decisions. Additionally, the encounters with various influences on their perspectives affected their decision making. As a preface to the sub-themes, it is relevant to note that three participants shared a general approach to their decision-making. It is important to highlight these thoughts as they did add to the overall approach to how these participants arrived at decisions. First Paul talked about how he “takes the time to really think about it, to come at it not just from a different perspective.” He liked “to really come at it from the opposite perspective” where he would “think about it from their shoes” which allowed him “confidence with the decision.” Scott’s general approach was to “just try to look at things objectively, kind of a utilitarian sense.” He would wonder “what would do the most good, not what’s most good for me, but most good in general, for the whole universe.” Zack liked to “take a step back and try to understand the bigger picture, constantly having to bring the conversation back and be like, look, we need to do things that are practical.”

The *Approach to Decision-Making* superordinate theme yielded five sub-themes – *Be Informed, Having Conversations, Looking Back and Looking Forward, Influence* and *Grappling with Identities*. The sub-theme *Be Informed* explained how the participants gained information to decide. The sub-theme of the *Having Conversations* described how the participants would talk through decisions with others to be better informed. The participants who contributed to the sub-theme *Looking Back and Looking Forward* talked about learning historical information
about current issues, and looked forward to how their decisions would impact students and the organization after they left their position. The Influence sub-theme explained how external influences perceived by the participants effected their decision-making. The Grappling with Identities sub-theme showed how the participants’ internal influence and perceptions affected their decision-making.

**Be informed.** The sub-theme of *Be Informed* was perceived by the participants as one *Approach to Decision-Making*. This sub-theme was expressed by Isabel, Paul and Jay. These participants talked about asking questions and finding out the information. Isabel said, “I like to ask questions sometimes if I really don't know.” The example Isabel shared about asking questions was about the proposed increased fee decision.

I talked about the fee referendum. I had to ask a lot of questions. Even though I did vote on it, agreeing with it, I still had a lot of questions because it was ... it's a pretty big deal because it's part of the fees. Especially with the tuition increase that's going to happen soon, I was very concerned. That's a lot of money. I think I asked questions about a lot of the stuff mentioned in the fee referendum, like the food pantry, the library and all these other things. Which I thought was cool, I was all for it based on the food pantry.

Isabel wanted to ask questions about the fee referendum, even though she voted in agreement for it. She had reservations about the amount of money it would cost students, and she had questions about what the money would be used for. She did say in her role she felt “more comfortable being on the Board” and this led her to be “more active in talking about my ideas and questions.”

Paul talked about being informed about the proposed fee increase through considering information he received about budget cuts and about what students said they wanted. He was
given this information because he was an executive officer. This information he had was shared with the rest of the Board of Directors for the whole group to decide.

Yeah because we were very clear about what were some of the things we were lacking in terms of some of the budgetary cuts that would have happened. We knew the ins and outs of the budget. We knew what students wanted in terms of this last year and some of the highlights from last year of what students were really passionate about and how we could best incorporate that into this fee referendum. We were well aware of what the priorities of this referendum would be.

Jay said he “usually tries to keep on the up and up about going out and finding the information first.” This helped him to “be well-informed and have an opinion” so he could share as a student representative. Because he made the effort to be informed, he felt the “faculty and staff who might be in on the meetings, they look at me more as, this is a student who really cares, and who’s not just showing up to the meetings and being a silent voice.”

Through the decision-making approach of asking questions, these participants could dig deeper into issues and were better informed at vote time. Also, taking the information they knew and sharing it with the other members of the Board of Directors made sure everyone was informed. Ensuring they were informed helped add responsible performance of the role duties and made these participants stronger decision-makers.

**Having conversations.** Four participants talked about *Having Conversations* as an *Approach to Decision-Making*. Isabel, Scott, Paul and Jay used this approach to understand more about an issue, and to help break down the information to make a more informed decision. Isabel shared how she used conversations to help her to see the smaller details as she approached a decision.
Oh, so I basically look at the bigger picture. Then I break it up into small details but in order for me to break it up into smaller details I need to talk to someone who can see smaller details. I just tend to look at the bigger picture in general.

Scott used conversations with others as more of a debate to help him decide. He said, “I like speaking my mind to people, and arguing with people helps making better decisions.” Scott enjoyed “arguing and debating stuff” because it “helps me make the best decision possible.” He thought “what contributes to good decision making” was “arguing the points inside your own head” to “build up the other side that I would normally be against.” He would then “see if I can tear it down, instead of just discrediting something that I'm against because I'm against it.”

Paul liked to have conversations about issues with the “people who are championing them.” He liked to learn further “what is the issue, what are the conversations they have had, with who, what is the reasoning behind it.” Asking questions to get more information through conversation was an approach Paul would use in his decision-making.

Jay appreciated having conversations about issues during official meetings. He talked about the proposed fee increase and said, “my decision made on it I think was probably due to the talk we had during the BOD meeting.” Through the conversation and “talking about the fees that we have to pay and the different avenues that we may have to pay for in the campus” helped Jay understand the issue more thoroughly.

The participants said *Having Conversations* was another approach they used to become more informed in their decision-making. Talking through an issue with others helped these participants learn more information and to give them more perspective. This further development of perspective helped them to form their own opinion on the issue.
Looking back and looking forward. Another Approach to Decision-Making was Looking Back and Looking Forward. The participants looked back at what had been previously done before in Associated Students, and the how the decisions made in the present would impact the future. The information this approach produced created another perspective for the participants to use in deciding. Paul and Zack discussed historical perspective as an attribute of deciding. Paul said, “once I'm aware that this is the institutional knowledge and this is how it would possibly impact the students on our campus” he could move on and decide. He also expressed interest in precedent, saying he would appreciate “seeing the work of the previous execs” as information relevant to use in making his decisions.

Zack also looked to work done by previous Boards when it came to determine the amount of increase to propose for the fee referendum.

In deciding on the dollar amounts we looked at the different programs and initiatives that were started through previous Boards and weren't able to happen due to revenue or due to budgetary problems and then just different things that this Board wants to work on. He gained historical perspective through learning about past budget proposals in the corporation. “I learned more about the budget and I learned more about the history of everything.” He realized “how we didn't have enough money to sustain our current operations and build any new ones.” This information from the past combined with his desire to implement new operations helped form the decision of proposing an appropriate fee increase.

Looking at future impact from decisions was also considered by Paul, Zack and Jay. Paul discussed how he saw his actions and decisions affecting whoever came into his role after him.

I look forward to whoever comes into the role. I think they're in a good position in terms of how we're growing. We're going with the 24-hour library, the food pantry, all these
things the will only expand the visibility of AS. My hope is that whoever comes in really just builds on the progress.

Paul also talked about how some decisions that he made would not impact students immediately, but would lead to future decisions that would impact them later.

The overwhelming majority of students on our campus are not significantly affected by the decisions made this week, but will be more so by future decisions that stem from these. I think it's important to think of what can happen in the future because of the decisions that we make, and that we must always be held accountable for that.

Zack shared many sentiments Paul expressed in looking to the future with decisions. He talked about being able to “start new traditions, and be part of decision making that 50 years from now students” will be benefiting from the decisions. He was attentive to the fact that “we were part of the development” of those traditions. Zack also looked to the future in terms of actions he took citing a change within the governing documents that “will make AS more efficient for years to come.” He also looked at the near future thinking about the rest of his time in his role to “prepare the Board for next year.”

Jay shared how engaging in the duties of his role related to executing events for students led him to think about the future of his position.

You try to make events and then by the time you get done planning and engaging with other people so you can make those events happen, you realize you've set up something for next year. You already have a precedent set so now on you've started something forever and ever and building relationships with more and more people. At the end of the day it's like I've learned something and I can use these skills that I've got and the people that I met during this process for future engagements or future references for anything.
Jay talked about his view that the work that he did would benefit the students in the future, as well as the present. He said that when he worked with faculty and staff, giving his perspective “and having it welcomed” by them was “the greatest feeling because it lets you know you're putting in work for future students to come and the students in the present, and its being well-received.”

The participants who used knowledge of historical Board of Directors decisions gained another perspective to inform their decision-making. They took what had been done in the past and applied it to what could be done in the present. Additionally, the participants looked to the future to consider what effect their current decisions would have on the corporation and the student body.

**Influence.** The sub-theme Influence illustrates ways in which the participants’ perspectives were biased by outside factors. The shifting of their perspective from outside influence changed how they would approach their decision-making. Three participants talked about how they saw Influence affecting their Approach to Decision-Making.

Scott tried to approach his decisions with official information that was presented and tried not to let the gossip he encountered influence his decision-making.

I try to take myself out of it. I know to just operate the side based on things that are on the table, not the under the table talk. I try not to let the gossip or the rumors influence my decision, or if they do, I try to make sure I at least have something official to back up my decision, too. Even I have a little bias from some gossip, I also want to have an official scapegoat to put that bias behind.

Scott acknowledged he had some bias from the gossip in which he was exposed, but he tried to have official information as the evidence that ultimately backed up his decision.
Isabel spoke about feeling pressured to decide on the fee referendum. When the decision came up to have the student body vote on the increased fee referendum, she shared how she felt in that moment.

I felt like I needed time to think about it, but I definitely felt pressured to make a decision right on the spot. I think the pressure that I was feeling was because I didn't want to be the only one to either say no or abstain from it.

Isabel also expressed she felt the votes they must do for formal operation of the corporation were not necessary. The Board had to vote to authorize a certain number of people to be approved signers for the Associated Students bank accounts. She said, “it was easy to make that decision since we couldn't really do anything about it since it was just asking if it was okay to authorize signatures.” She went on to explain about how the staff members presented these types of agenda items using corporation formality to essentially force a yes vote.

When they explain stuff or they try to make it clear to us, it just seems like it's probably going to happen. It just seems like some of the decisions that we have to make, it just feels like we don't really need to make a decision because it's probably already going to be agreed upon. It was with the bank signatures that we needed to approve upon. They have to formally be like ... Okay. Explain it and then we do the whole "aye" or "nay" thing. Some decisions like those, where I'm just like, do we really need to agree upon it in this meeting right now? Can we just be like, 'Okay, that's fine?'

Isabel did not see the purpose of having to go through the official motions of the meeting to agree to something that she viewed as “already going to be agreed upon.” The external force that is the typical operations procedure of the corporation influenced her decision-making in this example, which she observed and felt she could not object.
Zack expressed how putting trust in others was an influence in his decision-making. He went on to talk about how that changed over time within his role.

At the start, I think I was very trusting, almost, and everything that any advisor or anyone who worked for the campus I fully believed. I think the best of every single person that I meet, and so I was just very trusting of everything that I heard. Now, as I've kind of come to understand the unique relationships that people have with each other and just the different work styles, I'm not as trusting and when I just blindly believe something that I hear, now I take everything with a grain of salt, and before I act on it, try to find out more information because I think when you have a lot of people who work together, people are friends with people. Some people don't like each other, and so I've learned that there's a weird dynamic of people saying things that necessarily aren't true or may have their own opinion on it. I think that's been something I've learned, is just not to blindly believe everything that you hear, and then don't make decisions off of just one person's input or off of what you hear from one person.

The outside Influence the participants received changed their perspective in their Approach to Decision-Making. They felt pressure to not be the only one who said no, or had to vote for corporation formality rules. They had the bias of gossip and were learning whether to trust in people to tell the truth. They perceived their decision-making approach was swayed by outside influences.

Grappling with identities. The final sub-theme within the Approach to Decision-Making superordinate theme was Grappling with Identities. This sub-theme addressed by all five participants expressed how they perceived their own identities in their decision-making approach. The participants were given a question prompt in the last week’s journal entry
assignment to address to what degree they saw their identities influence the way they decided in their role. Isabel talked about her experience and how her identities influenced the way she thought about the increased fee referendum.

The fee referendum definitely had some effect on my socio-economic identity. I understand that there are wonderful benefits to the fee referendum, but I depend on the income of my parents and since being in college, they have been struggling trying to support me financially since I currently do not have a job. An extra $25 might not seem like a lot, but a lot of students pay fees from out of pocket and the fees are already pretty high. That extra $25 could go towards essentials like textbooks, food, and gas.

Isabel commented how her own socio-economic identity influenced her decision, stating, “it is difficult trying to separate any of my identities from influencing some decisions, but my first priority is to represent the students and be their voice.” Further, “I have to think about a whole range of people with different identities before I can think about my own.” Isabel talked about how she tended to reach out to students who she personally identified with “more than I do other communities or groups at school.” But shared “it is a goal of mine for this spring semester to reach out to more communities and groups” she specifically does not consider sharing her own identities.

Paul shared his thoughts about how his identities and privileges influenced how he approached the decision to advocate for creating a food pantry on campus.

The grappling of having to endure certain hardships of my ethnic identity and the privileges that come with being a straight male, have allowed me to make decisions in which I am capable of drawing from both narratives. In thinking of an example, the obvious one that comes to mind is our food pantry initiative. The food pantry campaign
has been, for the most part, an advocacy campaign. Speaking with future stakeholders, brainstorming the logistical aspects, and encouraging people to learn more and donate has required us to be able to tell stories and share our own. I am able to draw from my identity a story that tells why food insecurity is such a pervasive issue, especially for those who are far more underprivileged than I am and whose identities produce even further disadvantages. I am aware of some of our own cultural norms regarding hunger and homelessness, and I am able to connect with other students on campus who identify similarly and feel the pressure of those norms.

Paul recognized that his various identities would contribute to a story supporting the importance of having a food pantry on campus. He also told stories from other students who have similar and different identities from his own. He went on to talk further about how he saw his identities fitting into the duties within his role.

It would be impossible to separate these identities from my role on the Board. They are who I am, and they were fundamental in getting me on the Board. What I must balance is making sure that I do not consider my identities, or the experiences that have accompanied them, as being able to represent the entirety of the student body. They help me stay grounded in my own beliefs and values, but they also force me to consider that students of different identities and background will think differently than I do in certain situations. These identities are crucial to who I am. In serving students, I don't think of how I can suppress my identities, but how I can enable them to embrace their own and appreciate each other's.

Scott had a different outlook on the concept of identities. He approached decisions with no identities in mind. Rather, he approached decisions with facts.
First, I would say that every one of my decisions is equally influenced by the personal experiences and culturally ingrained ideas which are popularly referred to as identities, but always at a subconscious level. I try very hard to let every decision I make be utilitarian, and do not take the race, gender, sexual orientation, or socioeconomic status of myself or anyone else into consideration when I am making decisions; the only things which matter to me are the facts of things as they are and what I can do to change them for the better (as I see it). I do not keep my "identities" or other roles separate in any way. Zack shared some difficult experiences he encountered when it came to his identities and how he would approach a decision.

If I were to speak out and go against the majority on a college campus I would be ridiculed. I find it very ironic that on a college campus with so much "diversity and inclusion" that I do not feel comfortable speaking my mind about things, in fear of being ganged up on by my fellow "student leaders."

Zack, felt he could not speak his mind about certain issues as he would be “ganged up on.” He attributed this perception to his identities and the privilege he may have held.

None of these identities have anything to do with my role, but I feel that I am very stereotyped into what people may assume when they meet me. Over the course of my time, I have been called "privileged" and I have been said to use my male privilege to control a situation. I think being in a fraternity, and being more politically conservative people assume that I am not an ally for social justice.

The perception Zack thought was that his identities were being stereotyped and others believed he did not support social justice. He also stated his identities did not have “anything to do with” his role. Zack shared an experience about an event poster he saw that made him feel
uncomfortable. He grappled with the decision to say something about this experience, but because of his identities, thought he did not “have the place to say how I felt about this event.” He said of this experience, “my fear was that if I argued with this event I would be deemed racist and not supportive.” Instead of saying anything, “I chose to just stay quiet and not cause any problems, for the sake of not starting any drama on campus. This was frustrating for me, because part of my identity kept me from questioning something that I did not agree with.” Zack followed up this experience with his overall view of how his identities interacted with how he made decisions.

I try to keep all identities out of my role on the Board, because I do not think it matters. I try not to judge anyone by any of their identities, and I try to put myself in other peoples’ shoes as much as I can. But at the end of the day I do recognize that I may come from a place of privilege and that may indirectly affect my decision making.

Jay talked about his various identities and organizations he was involved in outside of Associated Students. He discussed how he approached the identities and the roles he fulfilled as an influence in decision-making.

I choose not to let these roles get in my way as I make decisions for the entire campus community that I am representing. When looking at the roles I take part in, in correlation to my AS work I know there hasn’t been any issues that have come up with organizations I have been a part of. If this were to happen I would try to stay out of the decision-making process but help to provide clarity on what an issue may be to clear any thoughts of confusion. It is possible to be impartial, but just to keep a level head these are the steps I would choose to do.
The *Grappling with Identities* sub-theme showed how the participants perceived their own biases in their *Approach to Decision-Making*. Some chose to recognize their identities and have them be a fragment of information to guide the overall decision. Others chose to separate their identities out of the decision-making process. Either method used was an influence on their decision-making approaches.

**Conclusions.** The individual perspective each participant provided demonstrated how they approached decision-making. The individual explanations gave insight into their personal considerations of the information and influences they encountered. There was general approach three participants discussed. These general approaches were echoed throughout all participants’ words. For these participants to fulfill their roles as student representatives they had to put themselves in other’s shoes to understand different perspectives. They also had to look at the big picture of each issue and use practical information to approach their decision.

The participants wanted to *Be Informed* about the issues they encountered. They informed themselves through asking questions. In Isabel’s experience, as her comfort being on the Board increased, she found it easier to ask questions and make more informed decisions. In addition to asking questions, the participants acquired information through intra-Board sharing. Paul was given information as an executive officer he thought was his duty to share with the rest of the Board so they would be better informed, enabling them to make a better decision. Jay appreciated being informed. He tried to have the campus’ pulse on the current information so he could form opinions to represent the student voice. Jay indicated being informed added to being held accountable to his role responsibilities. It is clear the participants perceived the impact their choices made and felt an obligation to find enough information to seriously consider the issues.
Along with being informed, Having Conversations was viewed as an important Approach to Decision-Making. Through conversations, Isabel could see more details to a situation could help her put together her own opinion on the issue. Jay liked to have the conversation in the formal setting of a meeting to understand more about details of an issue. Scott used the method of debate with others and with himself to see all angles to an argument. He used the approach to help him make the best decision in his mind. Further, Paul used conversations to ask questions with the person who championed the topic. He liked to learn the information from that person to learn why it was being brought up for decision. This approach helped Paul decide to be informed of all the arguments for a given resolution, and he could wrestle with them in coming to his ultimate decision. For these participants, conversation was a way for them to think over arguments from multiple perspectives and understand issues in their own way.

Another Approach to Decision-Making used was Looking Back and Looking Forward. When the participants looked back they were learning the historical perspective of a topic. Learning the institutional knowledge helped Paul and Zack see what had been done before and how they got to where they were currently. The historical information gave them more perspective on current operations, and how their choices might be reflected upon by future Boards. Additionally, Paul and Zack both talked about honoring the work of previous Boards. They did not want to undo all the previous work, but also inquired if the precedents were still appropriate given the current issues. Along with looking at what has been done previously, it was also important to the participants to wonder how their actions would affect the future. Paul thought about the person who would come into his role after him and how he could best set them up for success. His hope is that they would be able build on his progress. Paul also recognized he was in his role for a short time and what he did in his role would impact the future. The
decisions made in the present may not have immediate impact, but it would lead to further impactful decisions. Thinking toward the future was part of Zack’s decision-making approach. He thought short-term in preparing for transition of the Board after him, but he also thought long-term. He appreciated he was part of the development of traditions that would be still going after he graduated. The process of looking to the future helped Jay understand the importance of preserving relationships to make things happen. Jay recognized he was setting a stage and precedent for the people who would be in his role in the future. The work of their predecessors and successors were in their minds as they tried to understand the rationale for having to make current choices and for the ramifications of their decisions.

The sub-theme of Influence arose from discussion of outside bias that affected the Approach to Decision-Making. Scott talked about how the gossip in Associated Students influenced how he approached a decision. He said he recognized gossip-induced bias and tried to only take official information into consideration. Isabel felt the influence of peer-pressure in decision-making, which came from not wanting to be the only one who voted no or abstained from the vote. Even though she had been informed about the fee referendum from the beginning of her time in her position, she thought that she still needed more information. The pressure not to be different from everyone else influenced how she voted on the decision. Also, she experienced the influence of the formality of corporation rules. She saw a decision of approving authorized signatures on bank accounts as something that was already agreed upon, so she did not see the necessity for her to decide. Zack was influenced by trusting others. He learned that he always trusted everyone from the beginning and would take their opinions as fact. In time, Zack started to understand the relationships within the Associated Students and on the campus. He learned to find out more information before making any decisions and not base it off the
influence of one person’s perspective. Whether from inside the Board or from outside, part of making decisions in their role included managing influencing factors.

The last sub-theme in *Approach to Decision-Making, Grappling with Identities*, provided evidence that the participants’ perception of their identities, and how they viewed their identities as influencing their decisions. Overall, the participants perceived the influence of identities in decision-making very differently. Isabel’s own socio-economic identity influenced her thoughts on whether other students might think paying extra money toward a fee would be difficult. She acknowledged her own identities, but in her role, she said she had to think of all the identities that everyone holds to best fulfill her role responsibilities. This participant tried to extend her identity into the decision considering how others in her group would react. It was important to Paul to know how his identities and privileges influenced his perception of a situation. But he also recognized that his experiences and identities did not represent all students. In his perception, he tried to balance his own identities and experiences to help illuminate his story while also talking about other students. He acknowledged he does not represent all students as they are not all the same, but he could do his best to bring all the different experiences into light. Scott acknowledged his identities in his discussion, but he felt he did not conform to the idea of identities. Instead of Scott considering identities of himself and others in decision-making, he preferred to look at hard facts. Zack did not acknowledge identities had anything to do with his role, while simultaneously feeling his identity stereotyped by being called privileged. Because he perceived the negative stereotypes about some of his identities, he felt he could not speak up against something. He thought he would be perceived as racist and felt frustrated because of fear that part of his identity would be used to attack him, which kept him quiet. He tried to keep his identities out of his role and he did not think it mattered, but he recognized his privilege and how
that may have indirectly effected his decision-making. This participant thought through
decisions, knowing they would affect different groups differently, but tried not to let this
influence his decisions. In the thoughts that Jay expressed, he would not let identities or roles in
outside organizations influence a decision. He did say if a situation was to come up where his
identities or roles would be questioned, he would step out of the decision. Jay said he would do
this to eliminate conflict of interest in a decision, but would be there to serve as a resource. This
participant said it was possible to be impartial in decision-making. The notion of identity was
widely acknowledged, but consideration of self-identity in the Approach to Decision-Making had
variable importance to these participants.

The superordinate theme of Approach to Decision-Making describes the participants’
experience of how they perceived themselves weighing different factors that contribute to the
decision-making process in their official roles. It offers a view of how outside influence can bias
the Approach to Decision-Making. Additionally, the participants explained how they viewed the
internal biases coming from their identities and how it affected their Approach to Decision-
Making. The experiences of the participants’ perceptions that were shared came from in-depth
reflection. The act of participating in this study provided the participants the opportunity to
reflect on their overall experience in their role.

**Subordinate Theme 4: Importance of Reflection**

In the final Skype interviews, all five participants expressed the superordinate theme
Importance of Reflection. Throughout the study, participants reflected on their individual
decisions. While contemplating their decision-making, they became more aware of their actions
and thinking. Prompted by the guided questions provided, participants regarded their approach
to decision-making differently. They learned more about themselves, how they individually
considered decision-making, and how decision-making fit into their perception of their roles. Participant’s responses regarding their participation in the study were prominently positive, and they each expressed an appreciation for taking part in the experience. The Importance of Reflection superordinate theme explains how participants made sense of their role as a decision-maker.

The superordinate theme Importance of Reflection yielded three sub-themes. The sub-theme Everyone Should Reflect yielded advice from the participants that everyone on the Board should reflect on influences and experiences that ultimately effected decision-making. The Gained from Reflection sub-theme highlights realizations participants made leading to new perspectives about their actions and decisions in their experience. The sub-theme Learned from Participation describes how each participant learned something new through participating in the study. The reflection each participant engaged in revealed how they perceived themselves as a decision-maker in their official role.

Everyone should reflect. The sub-theme Everyone Should Reflect came from Zack, Paul and Jay’s thoughts about how current and future Board of Directors members should reflect on their actions and decisions. Zack thought “this is something that AS should have students do just for their own personal development.” Additionally, he thought it would be a good idea to have the students “go back and almost keep a journal and reflect about the decisions” similar to the journaling he did during this study.

Paul talked about how the act of reflecting for this study was something he wanted others to do. He discussed how the importance of reflection would be something he would pass on to the person who would hold his position next.
Your research helped me think about that, and think about passing it on to the next. They should be asking the same questions. Did I think this through? Did it benefit the most people? Did my identity affect it? Did I dismiss someone else's perspective by thinking about my identity? They should be thinking about these questions. That was the best benefit that I had and that's what I hope to take away from taking part in the research.

Jay similarly indicated “every person who is in AS should probably have to do something like this,” and “I wish that more BOD members had the chance” to take part in the reflection exercises of the study. Jay went further to suggest reflection in journals should be done after committee meetings.

But I might have to suggest that, "Yeah you know after each committee meeting you guys should just write ..." I know we keep those journals [transition binders] about what you do, but no one ever keeps a journal with the committee ... That you went to. Or like a little write up that says, "Hey we talked about this. This person is talking about this." Just so, BOD if they ever wanted to see what's going on, we all have those quick write ups ...

We can easily say, "Hey this is what my AS representative is doing for me." Yeah it shows an accountability piece.

The participants saw the value in reflecting on their participation in the study. They thought the experience of reflection on their decision making was so valuable that all other Board of Directors members should also reflect in a similar manner. The participants thought everyone on the Board would benefit from reflection of their actions and decisions.

**Gained from reflection.** The act of reflection as a part of participation in the study resulted in each participant gaining a better understanding of how they approached their decision-making process. Through the process of looking back on all reflections they provided
throughout the data collection period, participants realized they gained something from the
reflection process. Whether it was gaining a better understanding of how they approached
decision-making in their role to a general appreciation of the act of reflecting on the decisions
they made. Isabel gained a better understanding of how she approached decision-making before
and after participating in the study.

Once I started this, it made me more conscious about what I thought and what I felt. I was
beginning to ask more questions. Usually I never really asked questions before. Also, I
feel like I'm more informed now because I have started asking questions and I'm trying to
understand whatever represented more rather than just the initial information that they tell
us. I've become more mindful when it comes to making decisions. Ever since I started
this whole thing, I'm just like, "Okay, I need to ..." Before I was just going with the flow,
just going with what everyone was saying.

Scott looked at reflection as something that “kind of comes naturally” to him. Through
the experience of participation in this study, he liked “to look back on my day, and just think
about the decisions I make,” and “realized how few decisions I've really been making, and I
guess it's just what counts as a decision so much.” Through reflection, Scott gained a better
understanding of what an actual decision was in his role and how frequently he decided.

Paul gained a better understanding through the journal reflections how to think back on a
decision and apply it to future decisions.

It was helpful in that after I would write one journal, I would pull on what I wrote for that
journal entry for the next decision I would have to make. If I had this sort of thought
process with this decision, the next one, then maybe I should think about that as well. It
was helpful in the sense that it really made me, I don't want to say second guess. It put the
thought in my mind that okay, I had to question this through this particular lens, because that's what I did for this issue. It was helpful in that sense. It put a little, I don't even want to say barriers, but it put some more checks in my path before making a decision.

Through the act of reflection on a single decision, Paul began to more thoroughly consider different aspects of his future decisions.

Zack talked about how it was difficult for him to write the journal entries, to talk about himself. But he gained an appreciation for the act of reflecting.

It's definitely something that has taught me that reflecting is good and I think that's something that you always need to do in your work, so I'll take this with me as I grow and mature and start a full-time career, to always try to look back and reflect because you may think of something a lot differently than you did at that moment if you take time to look back on it. I think it's been good. The decision-making piece is interesting because you make these decisions and that's how you feel about it, but then if you reflect back six months, you see the implications of what actually was a result from that so then you may feel a little bit differently about something.

Like Zack, Jay had a little bit of difficulty talking about himself in a journal. He said, “journaling was a little bit tough, it was so weird talking about what I did.” Despite this awkwardness, Jay talked about how he thought it was valuable nonetheless. He thought he was able to really analyze the things discussed in his committee and Board of Directors meetings, and “it made the experience a little bit better, it allows you to sort of keep your head clear and level.”

Jay also indicated the exercise of reflecting on his identities was important.

I really like the fact that we had the questions and it was saying about your roles and what you describe your identities. When you think about your identities and everything, I
really liked that because I feel like it could help an AS member realize what his passions are, and what he likes. What his pastimes are and where his biases might lie.

As a result of reflecting, Jay discussed the meaning of what he was doing in his role and realized he was in a job that must be taken seriously.

Making sure that you're actually doing the work that you went in that committee meeting to do. That you're actually taking away from those committee meetings so you can be thinking about it, and ways to help at the next one. Utilizing that info to see how it affects the constituent's life and also your life because you're a student as well.

Through the act of reflection during participation in this study, each one of the participants gained further understanding regarding the nature of the execution of their role. They gained a new approach to decision-making, realized how few decisions they were making, thought how reflection would impact future decisions, or gained an appreciation of reflection as a generally useful practice. The gained realizations helped each participant and altered how they approached their subsequent actions and decisions.

**Learned from participation.** Through reflection of participating in the study, each participant learned more about themselves. In their final interview, each participant shared how they appreciated what they took away from the experience. Scott shared that the experience made him rethink how he made decisions by becoming more conscious when a decision was taking place.

Sometimes, you don't feel like you're deciding something. Maybe I don't see the fork in the road, but I walk down one side anyway without realizing it. I've been trying to be more aware of if I'm actually making a decision because some decisions feel so natural
that you might not realize that you could have made another choice. I think that's the kind of thing I've learned from the experience.

He went on further to talk about how he would take what he learned through his participation and apply it to his role in the future.

And as far as the research goes, I think it's going to change the way I think about my AS involvement for this next semester. Being more aware of my own behavior, realizing the decisions, and the factors that are going into them.

Zack discussed his realization that the reflection was an important part of decision-making. He previously did not examine the decision afterward and would move on to something else.

I'm really happy I did it [the study]. I think it let me sit back and reflect a lot about how I feel about things and look back on the decisions that I made because I don't reflect a lot about things, like once I make a decision I just kind of move past it. I definitely was able to see things in a different light about some of the decisions that I made. Look back on some things, I was like, "Wow, that actually did happen," or, "I did feel that way." I just didn't really notice it in the moment I don't think, so I think it was good.

He further talked about how in this experience it was a challenge for him to express himself through reflective thought.

I have a hard time talking about the way things make me feel, I guess. How to express my feelings about the decisions because I'm kind of just like, "That's just how I feel. I don't know how to explain it." I think it has helped me be able to talk about things that I've done in the past.
Jay expressed that the reflection experience “just made the whole experience great” and said, “I feel like the study is one of those things that makes you think about the people you're impacting.” When he thought about how the work was impacting him personally, he said he was letting it overwhelm him.

In Isabel’s experience, all decisions, even minor ones, required a great deal of thought. After participating in the study, she discussed how she felt performing her duties.

I learned that a lot of even really minor decisions, I still really have to think about it. I feel like this study has made me a little bit better at my role because at first, I didn't really feel as if I had any power in AS. The more I became more conscious about decision making, that's when I actually put a lot of effort into it and a lot more thought into it because decisions ... Even though the minor decisions we have to make, they're pretty important.

Finally, Paul talked about the insight gained through reflection during his participation in this study. He looked at the goals he wants to accomplish in his role and also about the future of his position.

It was beneficial because it allowed me to think about what I hoped to take away from the position, what I hoped to accomplish in the position. That's something that I wish I can pass on to the next person to make sure they're aware of that. Going into this, you may have goals. You may have an agenda. To know that this position will go on after us, and just to think about what it is that you hope to achieve so that the next person can build on and just do well.

The participants expressed an appreciation for taking part in the research study, conveying they learned something about themselves and how they performed the duties of their
role. Retrospectively, each participant could see how he or she benefitted from the act of reflection.

**Conclusions.** The superordinate theme *Importance of Reflection* explains how all participants made sense of their decision-making in their official roles. Through the reflection, they gained individual perspectives and approached future decisions differently. Additionally, through specifically reflecting about participation in this study, the participants realized reflection was valuable in the approach to decision-making. From this experience, the participants believed other Board of Directors members could benefit from reflecting on their decision making in their roles. Zack felt his experience of reflecting in a journal was valuable, and suggested others should keep a journal about decisions made as a fulfillment within their role duties. Paul thought the questions he was asked to reflect upon are broadly pertinent, and the other students on the Board of Directors should also have answered them. Paul further discussed looking to pass on the practice of reflection in the transition training of his successor. Jay suggested that keeping a journal after committee meetings would add accountability to the student representatives and the corporation. Incorporating guided reflection within the duties of the role for each member on the Board of Directors would add an accountability measure, upholding the purpose of the role in *Student Representation*.

The participants gained new perspectives from reflection through participation in this research study. Isabel changed her approach to decision-making by asking questions and becoming more informed. Before beginning the activity of reflecting on her decisions, she went “with the flow” and would make decisions based on the “initial information” she received. Scott liked looking back on his actions and decisions. He realized how few decisions he actively made and what counted as a decision in his role. Paul thought back on his decisions and applied his
thoughts to the future. He put more “checks” into his decision approach. Through this process, Paul realized he was more accountable to students by thinking about how students would react to his decision on an issue. Zack saw reflection being something he would apply to future practice. Further, he understood that through reflection, he could look back on a decision he made months after to see what the implications were of that decision. He concluded, making a decision is not something that just takes place in the moment, and it is not something to move on from and never think of again. Jay thought reflection enhanced the whole experience he had in his role, especially the process of reflecting on his various identities. Reflection helped him explore passion, but also to realize he had a job to do and he should take it seriously. Jay valued accountability in his role. Reflection created an avenue for Jay to think through the effects of his decisions and actions.

The last sub-theme of the Importance of Reflection superordinate theme describes what the participants Learned from Participation in the study and enumerated their major take-away from the experience. Each participant regarded his or her participation in this study as a development opportunity. Scott became more conscious of his own decision-making, and thought he would apply reflection to rest of the academic year. Zack learned that reflection is good for thinking back on how he felt about a decision in the past, allowing a reassessment of his feelings from the moment of deciding. He also learned he had a hard time talking about himself and expressing his feelings, thus he faced and overcame a challenge in his personal development. Jay learned to think how he impacted people and himself. He talked about taking care of himself because if he felt overwhelmed, it would affect how he performed his role responsibilities, and would impact the students he represented. Isabel learned she had to think through all decisions, even decisions she perceived to be less important. Through the reflection experience, Isabel
expressed she gained “power” in her role because she would put more thought into her decisions. The more informed Isabel was, the more she understood where her authority was in her decision-making. Lastly, Paul gained clarity that he was in his role was short-term and it was important to have attainable goals. He determined to prepare his successor to understand the short-term role concept so he or she could best represent students and continue the work he started.

The Importance of Reflection superordinate theme expressed how the participants made sense of their role in decision-making. The various reflection exercises produced individual perspectives on how they approached decision-making prior to, during, and after participation in the study. The participants’ self-awareness of their decision-making processes grew through reflection, which led to being more mindful in their approaches to decision-making in official capacity.

Conclusion

The findings presented in this chapter were produced through the process of applying Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis methodology. Five participants took part in data collection, which was approved by Institutional Review Boards. The data were produced from each participant’s contribution to one in-person semi-structured interview, four online journal entries, and a semi-structured interview conducted over Skype. The data were transcribed and analyzed to address the central research question of the study. The findings of this study were measured for trustworthiness through the member-check process, in which themes were sent to the participants for feedback on the study findings. The participants all agreed with the findings. Additionally, the trustworthiness of the study was subjected to an independent audit by the researcher. The audit followed the chain of documentation of the data collection and analysis. The research question for this study was “how do undergraduate student government participants
at a state university make sense of the decision-making process they undergo in official meetings?”

The superordinate themes yielded from data analysis were *Student Representation*, *Experience in Role*, *Approach to Decision-Making*, and *Importance of Reflection*. Each superordinate theme that emerged addressed the research question through the individual experiences of each participant. After further analysis of the superordinate themes, it was found each theme affected the others in various ways. The effects and connections of each theme is illustrated in *figure 2*.

The superordinate theme *Student Representation* indicated the participant’s views on the purpose of their official role. The five participants understood the purpose of their role was to engage with students, be their voice at appropriate tables within the university, and to strive for beneficial impact on all students. The importance of the responsibility of their role was highlighted through Paul’s words, in which he discussed he had to represent 14,000 students. Additionally, these student participants were responsible for running a non-profit corporation. At the university at which the study was conducted, the student body pays fees each semester making up the operating budget that compensated the executive officers and provides funding for events and initiative efforts. Given that student fees paid for them to operate the corporation, these participants are held accountable to the student body. This perspective of the purpose of their role *Student Representation*, as well as *Experience in Role*, affected the participants’ *Approach to Decision-Making*.

Each participant had their own unique experience in fulfilling their role as either an executive officer or a student representative. The experiences differ based on participant role, because the executive officers needed more and different information to perform their duties.
The experiences of learning new skills and navigating relationship dynamics with fellow Board members and professional staff also influenced their perspective. Their experience was also affected by how empowered they felt in their role. The sentiment that the participants discussed about not facing difficult or controversial decisions was also a major factor in their overall experience. The participant’s level of experience in their role shaped how effectively they fulfilled it. If they felt empowered and had the appropriate knowledge, they could represent students well. Participants who experienced negative aspects of the role may have felt less prepared or less empowered to represent the students. The *Approach to Decision-Making* was affected by the influence of the participants’ *Experience in Role*. The approach looked differently throughout the time in their role as they learned different skills and through reflection on their experience of participation in this study.

*Importance of Reflection* for each participant led to learning and growth in their experience as a student leader. By their accounts, the act of reflection enhanced the *Experience in Role*. The reflection also provided them with an accountability measure by which to gauge the effectiveness of their *Student Representation* and of their fulfillment of the purpose of their role. The thought prompts and interview questions that took place throughout data collection helped the participants see decision-making as a factor in their role. They thought back on how they made decisions before the data collection took place. They commented that their *Approach to Decision-Making* would be different in their role moving forward.

The superordinate theme affected by all other themes was *Approach to Decision-Making*. Participants realized their *Approach to Decision-Making* is comprised of their immediate perspective and occurrence of influences on their perspective. The perspective came from the general approach to decision-making such as seeing the big picture, being practical, and having
empathy. Perspective was also gained by talking with others to learn more information about an issue. The act of looking back, looking at the present, and looking to the future also added perspective in the *Approach to Decision-Making*. The participants experienced *Influence* on their perspectives, which in turn affected their decision-making. Some influences came from *Negative Experiences*, such as gossip, the feeling of not wanting to be the only one who voted against something, or putting trust into only one person’s information. The participants’ personal identities also influenced their perspective. Participants who recognized their identities either chose to have their identities be part of a decision, or they believed leaving them out would lead to being more impartial. The participants understood that when they recognized their own identities that their own views did not represent all student views, but added to the compilation of student stories. The influence of the responsibilities specific to their official roles, and their *Experience in Role*, affected their perspectives and their *Approach to Decision-Making*.

Additionally, the participants taking part in the act of reflection uncovered influences and perspectives they did not appreciate and had guided their decisions in the past. Awareness of these influences and perspectives affected their subsequent *Approach to Decision-Making*.

![Figure 3. Superordinate theme effects and connections.](image-url)
The analysis of each superordinate theme individually and collectively produced an overarching finding that the themes are interacting. *Student Representation* as the purpose of the role and the *Experience in Role* informed perspective in the *Approach to Decision-Making*. Simultaneously, the *Experience in Role* influenced the purpose of the role, *Student Representation*, which informed the *Approach to Decision-Making*. If one reflects, it influences perspective both on one’s own *Experience in Role* and on *Student Representation*, thus influencing the *Approach to Decision-Making*. This impact of one theme across all the other superordinate themes and their sub-themes leads to a better explanation of how the participants engaged in and made sense of the decision-making process in their roles.

In chapter five, the findings are compared to current literature and are then applied to future research and professional practice.
Chapter Five: Discussion and Implications for Practice

The purpose of this Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis study was to explore how undergraduate student government participants at a state university in California engage in decision-making in their official roles.

The qualitative research methodology used was Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). This methodological approach enabled the participants to explore personal meaning and sense-making about their official roles as student Board of Directors members and decision-makers in Associated Students (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). The central guiding research question was:

How do undergraduate student government participants at a state university make sense of the decision-making process they undergo in official meetings?

The guiding theoretical framework chosen for this study was the logic of appropriateness theory by James G. March (1994). The framework provided a perspective on how decision-making was approached wherein an individual recognizes their identities associated with the decision, the situation surrounding the decision, the rules associated with their identities, and the rules of the situation (March & Olsen, 2013). The theoretical framework was used to guide the formation of interview questions in the data collection; therefore, the framework shaped the types of responses that were provided by the participants. The lens of the logic of appropriateness framework allowed for further understanding of the participants’ perspective of action when decisions were made. The observed experiences of the participants were formalized into themes. The formation of the themes was guided by the logic of appropriateness framework to help describe the phenomenon of student government decision-making.
The findings produced four superordinate themes and seventeen sub-themes. The first superordinate theme, *Student Representation*, revealed the participants’ purpose of their role and how it impacted their approach to decision-making. This superordinate theme was comprised of four sub-themes: *Student Voice*, where the participants represented and delivered the entire student body's perspective to the university administration; *Interacting with Students*, how participants gained student perspective to provide the student voice; *Impact on Students*, the result from providing student voice in interaction with university administration; and *Role Responsibility*, how the participants viewed their job duties to fulfill their purpose of student representation.

The second superordinate theme, *Experience in Role*, contributed to the participants’ perceived ability and understanding of the decision-making process. The second superordinate theme contained five sub-themes: *Valuable Experience*, addressed the various positive experiences the participants encountered in their role; *Negative Experiences*, addressed the various negative experiences the participants encountered in their role; *Interaction with Professionals*, the participants' perceptions of how the professional staff, faculty and administration interacted with them in their role; *Board Dynamics*, how the participants perceived the Board of Directors members interacting with each other and how it affected their experience in their role; and *No Difficult Decisions*, how the participants perceived not encountering difficult or controversial decisions in their official voting roles and how it affected their experience in their role.

The third superordinate theme, *Approach to Decision-Making*, provided context about how the participants’ own perspectives and various influences on their perspectives affected their decision-making. The third superordinate theme included five sub-themes: *Be Informed,*
explained how the participants gained information to make decisions; *Having Conversations*, described how the participants would talk through decisions with others to be better informed; *Looking Back and Looking Forward*, how the participants learned historical information about current issues, and how they looked forward to how their decisions would impact students and the organization after they left their position; *Influence*, explained how external influences perceived by the participants affected their decision-making; and *Grappling with Identities*, showed how the participants' internal influence and perceptions of their own identities and identities of others affected their decision-making.

The final superordinate theme, *Importance of Reflection*, explained how the participants made sense of their role as decision-maker through increased awareness of their actions and thoughts in the decision-making process. The fourth superordinate theme was comprised of three sub-themes: *Everyone Should Reflect*, how the participants advised that everyone on the Board of Directors should reflect on influences and experiences that ultimately effected decision-making; *Gained from Reflection*, highlighted realizations the participants made during reflection leading to new perspectives about their actions and decisions in their experience; and *Learned from Participation*, described how each participant learned something new through participating in the research study.

This final chapter will present the findings of the study situated in current literature. Recommendations for future practice and future research will be presented.

**Student Representation**

The participants viewed *Student Representation* as the main purpose of their role as a student government member. Their perspective of the purpose of their role affected their decision-making process through the influence of their specific responsibilities. To them,
representing students meant that they provided the “student voice” in decision-making for the University. It also meant interacting with their student constituents to gain insight into many perspectives in order to provide an accurately representative student voice. Their interactions with students and presentation of the student voice to university administration was intended to create beneficial impact on the student body. The primary responsibility of the participants’ roles was to be accountable to the student body in representing student interests and ensuring that a student voice was always accounted for within university decision-making.

**Student voice.** For the participants in this study, *Student Voice* as a component of *Student Representation* meant they were in their roles to speak on behalf of all students from their institution. This finding reaffirms the current literature that the purpose of student government is to represent the student voice (Klemenčič, 2014; Lizzio & Wilson, 2009; Luescher-Mamashela, 2013). Supporting what Klemenčič (2014) and Love and Miller (2003) stated, the accounts by the participants reflect that they are bringing to light the most current trends and needs from students to advocate for their best interests.

The act of the participants providing the student voice as a proxy for all students to faculty and university administration aligns to the newer practice of shared governance. The newer practice of shared governance is a shift in philosophy from the 1966 American Association of University Professors statement of governance (Bejou & Bejou, 2016). This statement set the precedent in which faculty and administration act as the main responsible governing bodies within an institution (Morphew, 1999). As the years have gone by, university administrators have shifted away from primarily faculty input in governance toward multiple stakeholders having input (Crellin, 2010). As learned in this study, the student government had input in the shared governance process as a stakeholder, contrary to Miles, Miller, and Nadler
(2008) who indicated that university leaders were gradually edging out the student government in the decision-making.

Bejou and Bejou (2016) point out that shared governance in today’s college and university governance structures incorporates the collaboration of multiple internal and external constituencies. One of the main internal constituents is the student body (Luescher-Mamashela, 2013). The participants in this study shared that the purpose of their role was to supply the student voice in university decision-making. Reaffirming what Bejou and Bejou (2016) stated, this group of participants’ student representation reflects the newer adoption of shared governance practice by taking part in collaboration, open communication, and transparency with faculty and university administration. It should be noted that the level of involvement this study’s student government has within shared governance may be different from other student government bodies in their respective institutions. In particular, a student government that falls within Model 1 or Model 2 in the student government relationship to home institution with level of autonomy, involvement and power may differ from the present example [see Figure 1 in Chapter 1] (Cuyjet, 1994; Klemenčič, 2014; Miller & Nadler, 2006). The student government represented in this study falls within Model 3, where there is a high level of autonomy from the institution as they operate a separate, autonomous governing body which allows for a higher degree of student decision-making power (Cuyjet, 1994; Klemenčič, 2014; Miller & Nadler, 2006).

**Interacting with students.** In support of findings by Lizzio and Wilson (2009), the participants of this study stated that *Interacting with Students* was an important aspect of their role in student government. They also indicated that the students they engaged with had a range of attitudes when it came to their role as a student government representative. Lizzio and Wilson
(2009) found student government participants sometimes experienced that their student constituents were ambivalent or unaware of what they could do as student government representatives. Similar feelings were expressed by the participants in this study about their student constituents. These participants did not experience what Kennedy, Ginsburg, Harnois, & Spooner (2015), Klemenčič (2014), Menon (2003), and Miles (2011) have all said, which is that student constituent attitudes towards student government members were only involved to serve their own interests or the interests of only specific sub-populations of students. This sentiment may exist among student constituents, but these participants in this study did not experience those negative attitudes when they engaged with the student body. The student constituents would only come to them for specific issues, not for larger institutional improvement agenda items, which supports Lizzio and Wilson (2009) who indicated that constituents are only interested in specific issues.

The participants engaged in conversations with student constituents to learn what issues the students may be having. This finding was consistent with Miles (2011), who said that the student government representatives would actively seek out student input. The student input was important for providing the student voice within shared governance and meeting their needs (Miles, 2011).

**Impact on students.** The sub-theme of *Impact on Students* resulted in how the participants saw their interactions with their student constituents which allowed them to provide the student voice in university policy conversations to ultimately have positive and beneficial impact on students. This finding supported both Miles (2011) and Lizzio and Wilson (2009) who said the students take on the leadership roles in student government and strive to make beneficial change for the student body. Through taking part in decisions made on university
committees, the participants were informing policy that would affect institutional operations and eventually students. Consistent with what Wooten, Hunt, LeDuc, and Poskus (2012) stated, these participants were playing a part in having direct impact in their campus community and producing positive impact on students.

The finding of Impact on Students also showed that the participants were aware that the work they were doing in the present may not directly impact students immediately. As Bambenek and Sifton (2003) explained, it is important for students involved in institutional decision-making to understand that their decisions will have long-lasting effects and may not be implemented instantly. These participants understood that decisions made on university committees that they sat on would take time to implement. This showed they appreciated that the work they were doing in the present would have future implications for students who came after them.

Within this finding of Impact on Students, it was found that the participants appreciated the need to implement services for students that were not being provided by the university. Through student feedback and assessment of their own operating budget, this group of participants decided upon and implemented a student fee increase to their organization. This was to answer the need for student services, such as the operation of a food pantry and 24-hour library access. Through this action, these participants were answering the students’ needs. This action supports May (2010) and Klemenčič (2014) who stated that the student government can fill unmet needs where the university may not have the resources to do so. Because Associated Students is a student fee operated Auxiliary Corporation, the participants within their roles can provide needed services to students and have the beneficial impact for which they strive.
Role responsibility. The participants saw their Role Responsibility as a set of requirements they must follow through on and many tasks to be performed in their role. This finding supports Miles’ study (2011), in which students were said to be fulfilling the delegated tasks that were conferred upon them by the university. The participants understood their role responsibility as being a student representative by providing the student voice. The participants who were executive officers additionally understood their role to include ensuring efficient and smooth operations of the corporation. The participants recognized they had a responsibility to the student body to ensure that student fee money was used appropriately and that expenditures benefitted the student body. This finding supports Klemenčič (2014) and Miles (2011) in that, in this study, Associated Students operates a business organization that provides services to students but also fulfills a role in advocating on their behalf.

Conclusions. The finding of Student Representation being a primary purpose of the participants’ role supports and is consistent with current literature. The current school of thought of shared governance in which multiple stakeholders of an institution have a seat at the table in decision-making is echoed in the findings of this study. The process of student representation in the participants’ experience is consistent with current literature, which describes the students as fulfilling their delegated roles. The participants of this study believe that what they are supposed to be doing in their role is representing the student body. They want to have input in decisions made within university governance that will have lasting positive impact on all students. Their perceptions of how they adhere to the purpose of their role influence how they approach their decision-making. While performing the duties of their role, they encountered various personal experiences. These experiences affected and influenced how they saw and approached student representation.
Experience in Role

Participants in this study saw their various experiences in their role as influencing their perceived ability to fulfill their designated role duties, including making decisions. The various experiences they had while serving in their role contributed to how they approached decision-making. They were learning new skills, engaging in personal growth opportunities, encountering negative experiences, and navigating various relationships. The *Experience in Role* contributed to how they perceived themselves as a member of the student government within the larger university governance structure.

**Valuable experience.** The participants who described various experiences that they perceived as valuable support literature about gains that student government participants accumulate through participation. Kuh and Lund (1994) found multiple outcomes associated with personal and learning development, outcomes that are found with the participants in this study. The *Valuable Experience* these participants had echo Kuh and Lund (1994) and Wooten, Hunt, LeDuc and Poskus (2012) findings, such as learning new time management skills and gaining new insights into university operations. These skills build competence for their future careers and increase self-confidence (Kuh & Lund, 1994).

The participants who felt empowered and rewarded through their experiences in their role support findings by Elassy (2013) in which making active contributions in the formal university setting was perceived as valuable. Adding to that value was the feeling of preparedness described by the participants, in that they were effectively prepared to engage in the responsibilities of their role. Feeling prepared supports Lizzio and Wilson’s (2009) findings that student government participants experienced increased satisfaction and effectiveness through training and support. In agreement with Astin (1999) and Downey (1984), the participants’
involvement in student government and having valuable experiences enhances overall satisfaction of serving in their role. The *Valuable Experience* that the participants viewed as positive support literature which states that if they perceive their experience as significant and valued, they will be more likely to devote their time and energy to fulfill their role duties (Lizzio & Wilson, 2009; Manns, 2006).

**Negative experiences.** The *Negative Experiences* encountered by some participants stemmed from feeling unprepared, having a lack of clear and direct communication, and loneliness. These experiences were significant because they affected how the participant saw themselves in performing their duties of their role and in how they approached decision-making. This finding is consistent with Lizzio & Wilson (2009) in that if the student is not clear on expectations of them and if they are unaware of their legitimate power, then they are less likely to be confident in their role. It should be noted that the three participants who expressed negative experiences held the office of student representative. The participants who were executive officers did not share negative experiences. This could be because executive officers are required to work more hours per week, thus are exposed to more professional staff support and more interactions with organization operations. The executive officers have a better understanding of what is required of them and what they can do in their role. It is also noteworthy that the only female participant did not contribute to the sub-theme *Valuable Experience*, but instead contributed the bulk of the *Negative Experiences* sub-theme. There is not an explanation from the findings to address this phenomenon between the four male participants and the one female participant. Highlighting this observation is important, however, to validate Isabel’s experience.
**Interaction with professionals.** The Interactions with Professionals were an important contributing factor in the participants’ Experience in Role, as they perceived encounters with faculty, staff, and administration to be frequently positive. These encounters helped shape whether the participants saw themselves as valuable members of the Board of Directors, enabling them to fulfill their duties. This finding is consistent with Miles (2011), who explained that the participants experienced independence in their thinking and actions apart from their advisors, but found that advisors were available to provide support when needed. The type of support reported as experiences in this study is described as that which will build trust between the student and advisor (Laosebikan-Buggs, 2006; Miles, 2011), and here it helped build positive relationships between the two. As stated by Healy, Lancaster, Liddell, & Stewart (2012) and Miles (2011), the established relationship creates trust and leads to the student relying on the professional to provide feedback and pertinent information related to their role. Strong relationships experienced by the participants led to better ability to obtain information about the inner workings of the university, an aspect of the Experience in Role that was highly appreciated. In this study, there was a great appreciation for the professional staff. In particular, there was appreciation of their continual efforts to implement the students’ work so that the participants are able to do their work seamlessly. Professional staff were seen as the people who actually bring the ideas to fruition and ensure that the corporation runs smoothly. The recognition that was given to the professional staff by the participants regarding behind the scenes work they do is not a sentiment that is echoed by student government participants in the literature.

The participants felt that the professionals with whom they worked genuinely cared for them and for all of the students. They observed that the faculty and administration they worked with had students’ best interest at the forefront, which reiterates what Beeny, Garvey-Nix,
Rhodes, and Terrell (2008) and Golden and Schwartz (1994) stated as a good practice of professionals working with students. The majority of the participants perceived that the professionals they interacted with did not have any bad feelings or negative attitudes toward them or other students. This finding is in contrast with most current literature in which Bray (2006), Elassy (2013), Kezar (2010), Menon (2003), and Miles, Miller, and Nadler (2008) stated that perceptions from professionals working with student government participants were mostly negative. If there was the perception of any negative attitudes from the professionals toward the students, it was not widely expressed by the participants in this study. There was only one participant account that addressed a negative experience with a single professional advisor. That participant reported encountering a negative, unhelpful attitude from a staff member. This participant’s experience does support what Lizzio and Wilson (2009) discuss about negative staff perceptions affecting the students’ decision-making and whether they see themselves as being able to fulfill their role duties.

**Board dynamics.** The dynamics of the personalities and relationships among all Board of Directors members affected how the participants experienced their role and ultimately how they fulfilled their role duties. Participants saw that the members of the Board all got along well and worked well together. Working together well supports the work of Bray (2006), Kuh and Lund (1994), and Miller and Nadler (2006) who stated that taking part in student government leads to increased ability to work together. This finding continues the work of Astin (1999) in which he stated that student government participants who are involved actively in their duties will have frequent interactions with their peers. The positive interactions reported by the participants, especially the positive Board dynamics these participants experienced, led to higher satisfaction in their involvement. Even though the participants reported having different
viewpoints from each other, they could maintain a civil work environment and respectfully listen to each other.

**No difficult decisions.** The participants all stated that they did not encounter any difficult or controversial decisions in official meeting agendas in their role. This perception was interesting in that they did not perceive their official decisions as hard, even though they were making important decisions that affected the student body. They did not see their decisions as difficult because when time to vote came, they were prepared. They were given information about agenda items multiple times before the item was up for official vote through various trainings and conversations. The conversations that took place about the agenda items before a vote took place was intended to answer any questions that arose and to prepare the participants to make the most informed decisions. These students felt they were prepared going into a vote, thus their feeling of *No Difficult Decisions* could be recognized as not having any questions or uncertainty about the issue at the time of their vote. This experience supports what Lizzio and Wilson (2009) discussed as an important practice for student government participants, which is to have many trainings and ongoing structured support to prepare them for their role.

Another reason the participants did not encounter difficult decisions was that their group had positive dynamics, which created an efficient working environment. As Laosebikan-Buggs (2006) pointed out, those student government groups that have no strife amongst themselves are stronger and more cohesive. Indeed, this group, like others described by Laosebikan-Buggs (2006), worked well together and reported easily reaching consensus. Additionally, because the group was well-prepared with their agenda items and they all got along, there was little conflict among the group. If the group was encountering the agenda items for the first time at the official vote time, there could have been difficult conversations between the group members and that
could have led to conflict. The perception of no internal group strife could have also contributed to the participants’ perception of no difficult decisions.

**Conclusions.** The finding of *Experience in Role* supports current research, with a couple of exceptions. The *Valuable Experience* and *Negative Experiences* encountered in this study support research findings in which the types of experiences the student had in their role affects their level of overall satisfaction and ultimately their ability to perform their role duties. Additionally, the working relationships formed within the Board and perceptions that professional staff value and support students also affected the ability to perform role tasks, including the decision-making process. The perceived support and positive relationships from professional staff agreed with current research findings that *Interaction with Professionals* do affect the students’ ability to perform role duties. The students did not perceive negative encounters or attitudes from professionals, which stands in contrast to current research. Also, it is noteworthy that the statement about professionals doing the actual work of continual implementation of the students’ initiatives is not found in current literature. The dynamics of the Board were found to be in agreement with current literature, which concludes that students with positive working relationships have stronger consensus and higher satisfaction with their experience. Lastly, the perception of *No Difficult Decisions* and the factors that led to this perception agrees with current research. Having multiple trainings and conversations about a topic paired with no internal group conflict helped the participants reach consensus easier. Because they were supported and well-prepared they made important decisions that they considered to have been made easily. Their *Experiences in Role* shaped their abilities and approaches in their decision-making process.

**Approach to Decision-Making**
One of the findings in this study, the *Approach to Decision-Making* finding, explains how the participants perceived themselves to be making decisions within their role. There were various approaches used by participants in their decision-making that were guided by their own perspectives. These perspectives were influenced by their *Experiences in Role*, as well as by how they saw themselves fulfilling their purpose of representing students. Their decision-making was also influenced by their own internal perceptions of themselves, which they gained as they grappled with their various identities. Further, their decisions were influenced by reflecting upon their past decisions and through self-awareness about their decision-making process. Insight was provided into the participants’ thought processes during their decision-making reflecting on the situations they encountered.

**Be informed.** The participants wanted to *Be Informed* with all pertinent information about an issue before making an official decision. They did this through asking questions of their Board peers, student constituents, and professional staff. The professional staff serving as a resource to these participants supports Miles (2011) and Whitmore (2004) who stated that student perception of professionals is that they are experts in their field and are knowledgeable. The student perception of professionals is helpful to the students when seeking information. In agreement with the literature, the participants would rely on professional staff to be transparent with information given so they could be well-informed (Laosebikan-Buggs, 2006; Miller & Miles, 2008). However, the participants also relied on data-driven information from corporate documents and student body feedback in their decisions. This practice disagrees with Miles, Miller, and Nadler (2008); findings in their study indicated that student government members do not rely on data in decision-making. The participants viewed being informed as a means to
being responsible, so when they were called upon for their opinions they could serve as a valuable resource by representing students.

**Having conversations.** One method the participants used to gather information and process issues they were deciding on was through *Having Conversations*. They engaged in conversations with their Board peers, advisors, and fellow students to gain more understanding about the issue preceding an upcoming official vote. This approach helped the participants figure out how they viewed an issue and how others felt about the same issue. Through taking initiative to gather information and other’s perspectives these participants were undertaking a process described in the literature as contributory to developing their problem-solving and critical thinking skills (Kezar, 2010; Love & Guthrie, 1999; Miles, 2011). This practice of seeking insight from others supports Kezar’s (2010) contribution that students are taking it upon themselves to take in other perspectives in order to help form their own opinion on a decision. *Having Conversations* with others also shows that these participants were not making decisions in silos to serve their own self-interests. Current literature discussing perceptions of student government participants as only serving self-interests or the interests of a small population of the student body is not supported in this finding (Lizzio & Wilson, 2009; Miles, 2011; Miller and Miles 2008).

**Looking back and looking forward.** The participants considered historical information and future implications as a part of their decision-making approach. This approach does not support reporting by Lizzio and Wilson (2009), Miles (2011), Miles, Miller, and Nadler (2008), and Miller and Nadler (2006); these studies held that student government participants are only interested in the short-term and immediate outcome of their own goals. On the contrary, participants in this study were thinking about the implications of their current decisions and how
they would impact future decisions to be made. Participants were asking about how issues were addressed prior to them taking office and the actions taken by previous Boards that led them to the current issues faced, and considering precedents as guides about deciding on current issues. Reaffirming what Bambenek and Sifton (2003) stated, these participants understood what they decided could have long-term effects and wanted to set up student leaders who came after them to be successful to best represent the student body.

**Influence.** Participants found that they came across potentially biased outside influences while making some of their decisions. They had to navigate how they would perceive the outside influences they encountered and how it would affect their decisions. One of the outside influences they perceived was pressure to not have a dissenting opinion during voting time. In agreement with a common conclusion, these students’ perceiving of social influence to go along with the majority vote to please others created an outside influence the participants had to endure in their decision-making (Germar, Schlemmer, Krug, Voss, & Mojzich, 2014; Pavitt, 2014; Perez, Shim, King, & Baxter Magolda, 2015). Also, there was indication of influence from professional staff to go along with corporation proceeding rules and the influencing factor of time pressure to vote on items for approval. In social norm influence research, the established norms of an organization will influence decisions toward the majority preference (Germar, Schlemmer, Krug, Voss, & Mojzich, 2014; Pavitt, 2014; Sherif, 1935). The participants perceived authority figures, professional staff and executive officers, as needing approval votes on agenda items in order to be compliant with corporation operating needs. These votes had to take place in a designated time to meet compliance. The influence of time constraint pressure paired with top-down influence of authority figures is described by Germar, Schlemmer, Krug, Voss, and Mojzich (2014) and Pavit (2014) as presenting outside influence bias on the
participants. These types of social influences encountered by the participants support findings from Germar, Schlemmer, Krug, Voss, and Moizich (2014), and Pavit (2014), wherein they state that pressure from peers and authority figures serves as outside bias on decision-making.

Another outside influence experienced was gossip participants heard about the professional staff and other student Board members. This indirect communication about those around them influenced the participants’ perceptions of the professional staff and Board members’ opinions on issues. These perceptions support what Lizzio and Wilson (2009) described, which is that perceptions of staff and peers do influence the participant to negotiate others’ perceived attitudes, which affects their own opinions. The perceptions of authority figures as being knowledgeable was another influence that was perceived by the participants. Through this perception of authority figures the participants would place trust in professionals to give them the pertinent and correct information. This finding supports Kezar’s (2010) statement that students’ perceptions of authority figures’ guidance and knowledge do influence how each student will decide on an issue. Placing trust in others and accepting others’ information was an outside influence the participants had to navigate when they approached their own decisions.

**Grappling with identities.** The participants spoke about how they grappled with their own identities in their decision-making approaches. Their individual identities, including recognizing privileges that accompany certain identities, were part of the internal bias influence the participants had to navigate in their decision-making. The main issue they grappled with about their identities was whether they recognized their identity as a factor to help inform their decision. Some participants decided to separate out their identities as a factor in their decisions. Others chose to recognize that their identities influenced their perception of the issue, but ultimately understood that their own identities did not speak for all students. The literature
surrounding identity recognition in decision-making for college students primarily considers
decisions that only affect the individual. There is no evidence in the literature that speaks to
college students using identity as a factor in decision-making that would affect others. There is a
particular absence of literature analyzing undergraduate student government participants and use
of identity as a factor in their official decision-making role.

Conclusions. The participants’ decision-making approaches provided insight into how
they gathered information and navigated various influences. The different approaches used
supported some literature findings and disagreed with others. Because they wanted to be relied
upon to give feedback and make informed decisions, they sought out information from multiple
resources. This supports the literature in that the participants seeking outside information built
their problem-solving and critical thinking skills. They also relied on data-driven information,
which was in contrast with current research findings. Participants looked to authority figures as
trusted and informed resources, which supports literature findings. They also relied upon
historical context and thought about how their actions would affect the future. This finding was
in disagreement with current literature, which commonly states that student government
participants are only concerned with the immediate. Additionally, they were not serving their
own interests, which is also reported in recent studies. The various influences they encountered
supports social norm pressure research, which states that they will agree with authority figures
and align with majority opinions expressed by their colleagues. The reported understanding of
their identities and the decision to choose to use them as a factor in decision-making on issues
affecting others than the self was not found in current literature. All approaches to decision-
making shared by the participants helped form their perspective on an issue. Combining their
approaches with how they viewed their experiences in their role and what they considered their
responsibility to be when representing students informed their decision-making process. Through the reflection process of participating in this study, the decisions were also influenced by their reflective thought.

**Importance of Reflection**

Reflection was revealed as an important process in the participants’ decision-making. Through guided reflection the participants could think back on their decisions and how they approached each decision. During these guided reflections, participants also learned from their past decision approach, and consciously thought about how they would approach future decisions. By participating in the study, each participant gained new perspectives on their decision-making actions, and they were able to learn something new from their participation. Importantly, the participants recommended that other Board members also take part in guided reflection to be more aware of their own decision-making process.

**Everyone should reflect.** The participants saw their participation in reflection as being so valuable that they thought all other student Board members should also be reflecting on their decision-making. They appreciated thinking critically about how they made decisions for a sustained period and applied what they learned to future decisions. This practice supports the findings of Love & Guthrie (1999) and Miles (2011) in that the participants enabled themselves to take the initiative to solve problems on their own. The value that the participants saw in their reflection and the positive effect it had on their own decision-making led to them wanting everyone else on the Board to be also engaging in the same activity.

*Everyone Should Reflect* supports current literature about the Importance of Reflection on student development and learning. Participants in this study talked about their awareness of their own thinking about decision-making and how they would apply what they learned to future
decisions. This supports the work of Threlfall (2014), who found that the reflective participant is
more aware of their cognitive strategies and thus is able to apply them to learning about their
actions. Additionally, this also supports Rue, Font, and Cebrian (2013), who argued that the
importance of reflection by the participant is to be empowered to learn how to approach
problem-based learning; participants in this study expressed that experience. Also, participants
talked about how engaging in reflection made them more aware of the meaning of their roles as
being in service to others. This supports the work of Park and Millora (2012), who found that
students who engage in reflection are more likely to develop skills and commitment to helping
others. This finding by Park & Millora (2012) addresses leadership development growth, in
which the participants become better student leaders by engaging in reflection, becoming more
aware of their own values and beliefs. Reflection also helps the participant make meaning of
their decisions and become more aware of “contradictions and tensions in their environment”
which Park and Millora (2012) described as a practice that can lead to questioning and
challenging the system (p. 236). The skills outlined in the literature that are gained through
reflection are pertinent for student government participants to employ to be effective in their
role.

**Gained from reflection.** The participants gained awareness of their own thoughts and
actions through the reflection process. Through this awareness each participant was able to
critically think about what they had done in their past decisions and how they would apply what
they learned to future decisions. The participants were engaging in the reflective learning
process as described by Olsen and Burk (2014) that allows the participants to be self-aware of
their past actions and thoughts. Olsen and Burk (2014) further described the reflective learning
process as one where the participant can “explain their thinking” about their awareness of their
decisions and learn from their experience (p. 78). In this study, the individual participants gained different insights from their reflection experience, but individually and collectively they concluded that reflection was beneficial to their role in student government.

**Learned from participation.** Participants engaged in a learning opportunity by participating in the study. They were learning about themselves and how they fit into and performed their role. Through participating in the study, they were engaging in experiential learning. As described by the current literature, the participants were engaging in the experiential learning cycle by participating in the study as a student government participant (Guthrie and Bertrand Jones, 2012; Kolb, 1984). Participation in the study made them aware of how they were thinking, and reflection during the study made them aware of their overall experience on the Board. Because they were engaging in guided reflection while fulfilling the duties of their role, they were learning by doing and reflecting upon their learning. Kolb (1984) described the experiential learning cycle to have four parts; learning by encounter, learning by reflecting, learning by thinking, and learning by doing. Through taking part in this study, participants encountered guided reflection about their decision-making. They were then learning about their actions and thoughts through reflection. From this reflection on their experiences and decisions, they thought critically about their past and future actions. Then, by considering what they learned through reflection, they performed their role duties more consciously.

**Conclusions.** The findings from the theme *Importance of Reflection* supports current research findings. The participants’ suggestions that everyone on the Board should also be engaging in reflection supports the research that reflection is a beneficial awareness learning tool. Through the participants’ active engagement in self-awareness relating to their own values, and cognitive strategies they became more empowered to approach their decision-making.
Further, the *Importance of Reflection* finding supports reflective learning research through the participants’ explanations about how they feel, think, and learned during the process, and how it impacted their experience. Through encountering reflection as part of this study, the participants reflected on their learning, thought about their reflections and then applied what they learned during the process to future decisions.

**Recommendations for Practice**

The first recommendation for practice is for professionals in higher education who work with student government participants to be intentional with training student government participants about their role responsibilities, specific expectations of their role, and the authority they have within their role. The student government participants should also be provided with pertinent information they will need for decision-making. Trainings and informational sharing should begin early in the students’ role and should be presented multiple times to prepare students to make informed decisions. There should be no surprises at official voting time for participants. The intentional preparation should include all members of the student government group, not just the executive officers. If the student participants will be making an official decision then they should also be part of information sharing. If the student has a better understanding of their role responsibilities and expectations they will feel more confident, prepared and supported. Each member of student government should feel they are just as important as the students in executive roles.

The second recommendation for practice is to incorporate guided reflection as a requirement of student government participants. This will allow the students to think more methodically about decision-making on official votes. Having the students reflect could be instituted as a requirement of eligibility to continue in their student government role. Advisors
of student government could provide guided questions for the participants to think about and answer on a consistent basis. Executive officers who oversee student government operations could also implement guided reflection requirements for the representatives. Providing specific thought prompts is important to help guide the participant in reflection. The reflection will be an accountability tool for the student government participants to ensure they are doing their duties. Reflection will also be a way for the students to engage in learning about their own leadership development and could increase their involvement satisfaction.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

The current study focused on a single type of undergraduate student government, and so the findings cannot speak definitively for all student government types. The first recommendation for future research is to examine the decision-making process with student governments that fall in other models of student government. These include student governments which have less autonomy from their home institution and less participation in university decision-making. Research into other models could provide more insight into student government participants overall to understand their decision-making processes.

Another recommendation for future research is to explore the perceptions of student government participants with respect to how they view professional staff as resources to help them accomplish their goals. A finding in this study suggests the student perception to be that the professional staff are the individuals doing the actual work to maintain the organization from year to year. It would be interesting to determine whether other student government participants respond similarly.

Future research could be conducted to investigate gender differences as a variable within student government decision-making. In this study, there was one female participant, and her
experiences in the role were notably different from the male participants. Studies aimed at understanding gender-based experiences would contribute to further determining its influence on perception of the experience by student government participants.

Finally, future research could be designed to explore identity acknowledgement in decision-making in student government participants. As there is currently no evidence in the literature as to whether students make decisions that would affect others than themselves with their identity in mind, this would be a new area of exploration. Further understanding of students’ identity acknowledgement and if they use their identities as a factor in their decision-making could provide more insight into the overall decision-making process for this group of students. As pointed out in this research study, student government participants make important decisions that affect a wide range of individuals within a higher education institution.

Conclusion

The research question for this study was: How do undergraduate student government participants at a state university make sense of the decision-making process they undergo in official meetings? This question was addressed through guided reflection through a sustained period of time. Through reflection, the participants made sense of and assigned meaning to their overall role in the decision-making process. The participants each had a personal recognition and understanding that the purpose of their roles and the various experiences that they encountered shaped their perceptions while making decisions. In taking their various influences, perspectives, and experiences into account, the participants purposefully educated themselves and reflected on their thinking and actions to make informed decisions.

To understand why they were making decisions, participants recognized that the purpose of their role is to be the student voice. They wanted the actions taken in their official capacity to
have beneficial impact on the students they served. In this institution’s governance structure, the student government is considered a stakeholder in university decision-making, and it is included to provide the student voice. The participants did not feel they were being edged out or dismissed by faculty, staff and administration. In fact, they felt the opposite. This was significant to their student government experience, in that they had positive interactions with professionals such that they could rely on them as a resource to make informed decisions.

The perceived *Valuable Experience* gained while performing the role, combined with *Negative Experiences* that occurred, shaped the overall *Experience in Role*. These positive and negative experiences affected the level of engagement by each participant. The more valuable the experience, the more time and energy the participant devoted. A large piece of the *Valuable Experience* was shaped by the dynamics in the student Board. Because the *Board Dynamics* were so positive there was a sense of belonging, higher satisfaction and ease of working together. This provided the ability to have less conflict when making decisions. This likely varies year to year with new individuals making up individual Boards of Directors. Fortunately, the participants experienced feeling prepared on voting issues and were given the space to discuss items while receiving pertinent information. This intentional preparation for making each decision, paired with the lack of internal group strife, made it easier to decide on official agenda items.

The participants purposefully informed themselves about issues through asking questions, data gathering, and seeking out peer opinions and authority perspectives. They did not approach their decisions as only serving their own self-interests. A large contradiction to current research is that these participants took historical knowledge to inform decisions that they knew would have future implications, thus not only thinking of the immediate time they are in office. They
dealt with social norm pressures from the majority and the authority figures present at their official voting times. They also encountered bias of others’ opinions, which affected their own decisions. The participants had to recognize and deal with outside influence in order to make the most informed decision possible. Additionally, they had to acknowledge their own identities and choose if they would recognize them as a factor in their decision-making process. They did recognize that their own identities do not speak for all student constituents.

Reflection was viewed as valuable. It increased awareness of what the participants were doing, how they made decisions, and how they were going to apply their new perspectives to future decisions and practice. The support the participants provided for reflection practice corroborates reflective learning research, which highlights the importance reflection does for skill development. Through reflection as a part of this study, the participants experienced their own personal and leadership growth. The participants benefitted from guided reflection and held themselves more accountable to their role responsibilities and actions. The university benefitted from these participants taking part in the study, as they were more aware of how informed they were about their decisions. Of critical importance is the finding that student government participants who engage in guided reflection practices will be more equipped to make decisions and provide an informed student voice in the shared governance practice.
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Appendix A

Informed Consent Provided to Participants

**Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies**

**Name of Investigator(s):** Dr. Carolyn Bair and Sara Gallegos

**Title of Project:** Undergraduate Student Government Participant Decision-Making at a California State University: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis.

### Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study

We are inviting you to take part in a research study. This form will tell you about the study, but the researcher will explain it to you first. You may ask this person any questions that you have. When you are ready to make a decision, you may tell the researcher if you want to participate or not. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. If you decide to participate, the researcher will ask you to sign this statement and will give you a copy to keep.

#### Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?

We are asking you to be in this study because you are a current member of the Associated Students Board of Directors.

#### Why is this research study being done?

The purpose of this study is to explore and understand how undergraduate college students who serve as an elected or appointed member of a student government make decisions in their official role.

#### What will I be asked to do?

If you decide to take part in this study, we will ask you to participate in all of the following:

- A first-round in-person interview with the researcher.
- One month of journaling through an online journal website called Penzu. You will need to submit entries into the online journal, at least one per week for one month. The journal entries will have question prompts.
- A final interview conducted with the researcher through Skype after the one month of journaling takes place.

#### Where will this take place and how much of my time will it take?

The first-round in-person interview will take place on the Cal State campus with the researcher at a location on campus that is convenient and comfortable for you. This first-round interview will last approximately 60-90 minutes.

The one month of journaling will take place through the Penzu.com website. You and the researcher will sign up for a Penzu account at the conclusion of your first-round interview. There you will be given a password that only you and the researcher will have to access.
your journal. You will need to do at least one journal entry per week for a one-month period. Each journal entry will take approximately 10-15 minutes to complete.

The final interview will be conducted over Skype with the researcher. The researcher will be in her own home where it is quiet and private. It is recommended that you as the participant also be in a quiet and private space for this Skype interview. The final Skype interview will be approximately 60 minutes.

**Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?**

There is a possibility that your identity will not be fully anonymous due to there being a small number of individuals on the AS Board of Directors. Individuals at the study site who may read the final doctoral dissertation may be able to identify you as a participant.

To minimize this risk, you will be given an alias of any reference throughout the study, including all of your data files will be stored under your alias name. Any identifying traits, such as your representative title will not be included, you will simply be referred to as an Executive Officer or Representative on the Board of Directors.

**Will I benefit by being in this research?**

There are not benefits for participating in this study.

**Who will see the information about me?**

Your part in this study will be confidential. Only the researchers on this study will see the information about you. No reports or publications will use information that can identify you in any way or any individual as being of this project.

You will be given an alias when referred to in the study, as well as any data you contribute to will be saved under your alias name. All of your data will be saved in a password protected computer file, including any digital voice recordings. All paper notes or files with your data will be scanned and saved in a password protected file and all paper files will be shredded.

In rare instances, authorized people may request to see research information about you and other people in this study. This is done only to be sure that the research is done properly. We would only permit people who are authorized by organizations such as the Northeastern University Institutional Review Board see this information.

**What will happen if I suffer any harm from this research?**

No special arrangements will be made for compensation or for payment for treatment solely because of my participation in this research.

If you feel that you need to speak to anyone from any psychological harm or distress suffered due to your participation in this study, please contact your Student Health & Counseling Services at [phone number removed].

**Can I stop my participation in this study?**

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate if you do not want to and you can refuse to answer any question. Even if you begin the study, you may quit at any time. If you do not participate or if you decide to quit, you will not lose any rights, benefits, or services that you would otherwise have as a student.

**Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?**
If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Sara Gallegos at gallegos.sa@husky.neu.edu, the person mainly responsible for the research. You can also contact Dr. Carolyn Bair, cbair@northeastern.edu, the Principal Investigator.

Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?

If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 490 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617.373.4588, Email: n.regina@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

Will I be paid for my participation?

You will be given a $20 gift card to your campus bookstore as soon as you complete the study.

Will it cost me anything to participate?

You will not have any expenses to participate in this study.

Is there anything else I need to know?

You must be at least 18 years old to participate and be a current undergraduate student at [removed school name]. You must also be a member on the Associated Students Board of Directors.

Please inform the researcher if your primary language is not English, and if you need further explanation of this consent form and any of the study procedures. If necessary, an interpreter may be obtained to aid you.

I agree to take part in this research.

Signature of person [parent] agreeing to take part Date

Printed name of person above

Signature of person who explained the study to the participant above and obtained consent Date

Printed name of person above
Appendix B

Sample Initial Email for Invitation to Study

Hello AS BOD,

My name is Sara Gallegos. I am a current doctoral student at Northeastern University located in Boston, MA. I am working toward a Doctor of Education with a concentration in Higher Education Administration. My faculty advisor is Dr. Carolyn Bair, faculty member in the Northeastern University College of Professional Studies, Graduate School of Education.

You are receiving this email invitation to participate in my dissertation research. My research topic is undergraduate student government members participating in the decision-making process. More specifically, how you as a student government participant engage in your official decision-making role on the Associated Students Board of Directors.

As you are a current member of the AS Board of Directors you are eligible to participate in this study.

The total time commitment of this study will fall within one and a half month long, but will be approximately 3.5 hours of your time. The participation will consist of:

- One 60-90 minute in person interview with me (the researcher). This in person interview will take place the week of TBD. The in-person interview will take place on your campus.
- After the first interview, you will be signed up for an online journal account. You will be instructed to submit entries into the journal, at least one per week for one month. The time commitment on the journal can take anywhere from 10-15 minutes per entry.
- There will be a final interview conducted with me again through Skype after the one month of journaling takes place. This final interview will be approximately 60 minutes.

A $20 gift card to your campus bookstore will be mailed to participants at the conclusion of data collection.

If you are interested in participating in this study and will be available for the first round in person interview taking place the week of TBD, please let me know no later than TBD.

I look forward to hearing from you,

Sara Gallegos
Doctoral Student
Northeastern University
College of Professional Studies
Graduate School of Education/Higher Education Administration
Appendix C

Sample Follow-up Email for Individuals Interested in Participating in Study

Hello student name,

Thank you for your interest in participating in my doctoral dissertation research study about how you as a student government participant engage in your official decision-making role on the Associated Students Board of Directors.

For the next steps, please fill out the blanks below. Your information will be used to further determine inclusion of participation of the study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First and Last Name</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Committees you serve on, both AS and University-wide</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you have prior experience serving on the AS Board of Directors?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Will you be available to meet for 60-90 minutes sometime the week of TBD?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Reminder that the total time commitment of this study within a one-and-a-half-month period will be approximately 3.5 hours.**

- One 60-90 minute in person interview the week of **TBD**.
- One month of journaling, at least one entry per week taking anywhere from 10-15 minutes per entry.
- Final interview over Skype after the one month of journaling lasting approximately 60 minutes.

**Please respond to this email with your information by TBD. I will be in touch with you shortly after to let you know next steps.**

I look forward to hearing from you,

Sara Gallegos
Doctoral Student
Northeastern University
College of Professional Studies
Graduate School of Education/Higher Education Administration
Appendix D

Interview Protocol
In-Person and Skype Interviews

First Round Interview- Conducted In-Person with Researcher at Study Site
Semi-structured Interview Format
Approximate Interview Time: 60-90 minutes
1. Please describe your role in Associated Students.
2. What would you describe as the reason why you wanted to be on the Board of Directors?
3. Please tell me your understanding of what it means to be a student government representative.
4. How would you describe what it means to make a decision in your role in Associated Students? In your role in the university?
5. Let’s look at some meeting agendas and approved meeting minutes from the Board of Directors that took place earlier this fall semester. Here we have an action agenda item, can you please describe what this action item was about? How did you vote on this item? What would you say were the reasons for why you voted the way that you did?
6. Have there been any action agenda items that you have voted on so far this semester that have been difficult for you to make a decision? Why or why not?
7. Please describe to me how you have felt to this point in the semester about your ability to make decisions in your role.
8. Are there any other thoughts, feelings, experiences that you would like to share with me about your role or time on the Board of Directors?

Final round interview- Conducted over Skype with Researcher
Semi-structured Interview Format
Approximate Interview Time: 60 minutes
1. Please describe how your experience in your role on the Board of Directors has been to this point in the academic year.
2. Talk to me about talking to your constituents. How do you go about this? How frequently do you do this? What input from your constituents influence the way you make decisions?
3. During the journaling period you were making decisions and then reflecting on them, how was this experience for you? What have you learned?
4. Are there things you wished you would have been taught or learned before you started your role now that you have been in for this long?
5. What has the decision-making process meant to you in your official role? Elaborate on empowered, unsure, confident, informed—get all angles.
6. Please share any other thoughts, feelings, experiences you have had in your role of making decisions as a Board of Directors member and with the overall experience of participating in this research study.
Appendix E

Participant Journal Protocol

Journal Set-Up Procedures and Instructions

1. At the conclusion of the first round in-person interview, the researcher will have the participant set up an online Penzu.com personal journal account on the researcher’s laptop computer.

2. The researcher will show the participant the features of the online journal and how to submit journal entries to share with the researcher. The participant will inform the researcher when a journal entry has been submitted through email. The researcher will have access to the journal through logging into Penzu.

3. The researcher will also instruct the participant how to set up any reminder alerts to write the journal entry at the in-person interview.

4. The researcher will go over the timeline of when each journal entry needs to be completed and submitted within the one-month period. The weekly journal entries will begin the week following the first-round interview.

5. The researcher will provide the participant with thought prompts for journal entries. The thought prompts will be given on a sheet of paper to the participant, and additionally will be emailed to the participant.

6. The participant will also be notified at this time that the final round Skype interview will be scheduled sometime during the one-month journal period. The Skype interview will take place within one week after the one-month journal period.

Thought Prompts for Journal Entries

1. Revisit any decisions you made in your role on the Board of Directors this past week. Decisions can come from Board of Directors meetings and committee meetings (these include any university committees).

2. Please describe the decision, what it was about, how you decided, the overall outcome.

3. Please talk about in each decision what the situation was, how you felt making the decision, what were elements that informed your decision.

4. Please include any experiences, feelings, thoughts from this week in your decision-making role.

5. (Question prompt added to Week 4): Talk to me about instances when one or more of your identities (race, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic, etc., other involvement positions/job roles) has influenced the way you made a decision? Thinking of any situations you have encountered so far in your role that may have tapped into or may affect a part of your identity, how does this influence your decision-making? How separate do you keep your identities or other roles to your decisions in your role on the Board? Do you think they influence? Do you think they help give you insight? Do you think they cloud your judgement? Elaborate on your thoughts here.