How to make Students aware that Representation and Engagement is Important

An Article by
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Student representation is a very critical topic when it comes to the development and prosperity of a university. Unfortunately, student representation is not often focused on at universities and students are not very aware of its benefits. Student representation and engagement is looked at as a route to success and excellent teaching. However, this benefit can be abused and neglected when the engagement of students is not emphasized in a university's culture. To further elaborate on the matter, our team discussed the characteristics of student representation at our universities.

At the University of Cadiz, students follow an individualistic perspective rather than a collectivist attitude. Hence, students are not very interested in student engagement and representation which renders students taking advantage of such positions for personal interests. Another raised issue is that students are not aware of the significant impact of student representation and engagement.

At USEK, a critical aspect is the political influence on students. Students representatives are chosen randomly from a pool of candidates per faculty rather than allowing students to vote for the representatives they want.

Noting that the selected candidates are entitled to be politically independent. Here arises the political influence on the student community where politically affiliated individuals discourage such politically independent activities, they use tactics and methods to hinder student empowerment due to the fact that politics is not the ruling factor. Moreover, student representation is a rather new concept at the university for before all representation fell under the hands of the administration. The latter leads to several drawbacks including the fact that student representation is hindered; students are threatened by the power of the administration that they fear to voice their concerns due to the fact that decision making has always been in the hands of administrators.

At the Lebanese American University, student engagement and representation are highly encouraged. However, when it comes to electing a student, council politics and religion are the main influencers. The system of voting and electing representatives follows the country's elections process and mentality. The latter discourages the engagement of politically independent candidates and thus such students do not voice their concerns or get involved in choosing the representative they want. This is due to the fact that the probability of winning a seat in the student council is higher if the candidate is politically affiliated. Other activities at the university that preach student empowerment are simulation programs such as Model United Nations, Model European Union, Model African Union and Model Arab League. Such programs preach diplomacy and sustainability instead of politics.

"Student engagement is the product of motivation and active learning. It is a product rather than a sum because it will not occur if either element is missing. "– Elizabeth F. Barkley

From the latter quote one can say that the main elements to encouraging student engagement are motivation and active learning. Throughout our brainstorming session it was evident that the culture and structure of society highly influences student engagement. For instance, in Lebanon, politics and religion are main contributors in society and it is highly reflected in universities. This phenomenon hampers politically independent students in universities in a way that any social or political view that is not supported by a political party is considered invalid. Thus, such candidates refrain from being involved in student representation.

On the other hand, Europe offers a simpler lifestyle where students are not aware of the major impact representation can have on their student life and community. In both aspects the significant impact of student engagement and representation needs to be emphasized. It can help solve conflicts between students and facilitate communication between the administration and its students. The power distance [1] between students and the administration would be eliminated through competent and accomplished student representatives. Student representatives need to preach the norms of a diplomatic and legitimate society such as the right of voting, giving back to one's community, etc. Moreover, candidates selected for the role of student representation need to seek power as a tool for diplomatically representing others in need instead of seeking power for the sake of power.

Furthermore, the group reflected on the experience we were all partaking in, StEER-Leb. StEER-Leb encourages student engagement and representation in a diversified atmosphere with individuals from different nationalities.

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[1] The degree to which less powerful members of institutions and organizations accept that power is distributed unequally.

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Universities need to encourage adapting and learning to new cultures and mentalities. Some societies can be very contradictory in terms of beliefs and systems, yet they can benefit one another greatly. Heterogenous groups can be more effective in performance than homogeneous groups. The latter is also applied in a society itself; a group of highly assertive individuals can be less effective than groups that are a mix of extroverted, social, and conscious individuals. Here comes the role of universities to increase awareness of student engagement and empowerment by opening opportunities for its students to learn from other societies to be later implemented in their own societies; in addition to, workshops and lectures that would preach student engagement and its importance.

Student engagement and representation at universities could be transformational for students. Some may argue that student representation is not necessary as it could be time consuming and jeopardize one's education. In fact, student representation and engagement could actually facilitate the learning experience by making student life easier and less complicated. It could increase the sense of belonging to the university itself and society. Student representation could channel creative, challenging and radical ways to teach and support student interest.

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