

COALITION BUILDING AMONG FEMINIST STUDENT GROUPS AT AMERICAN
UNIVERSITY: CASE STUDY

BY

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|--------------------------------------|----|
| Introduction..... | 1 |
| Definitions..... | 3 |
| Feminist Framework and Critique..... | 6 |
| Feminist Methodology..... | 12 |
| Introduction and Strategy | |
| Organizations Selected | |
| Analytical Approach | |
| Limitations | |
| Results..... | 21 |
| Organizational Framework | |
| Agendas | |
| Networking | |
| Policy Influence and AU Hierarchy | |
| Discussion..... | 28 |
| Organizational Framework | |
| Agendas | |
| Networking | |
| Policy Influence and AU Hierarchy | |
| Final Thoughts and Reflections..... | 36 |
| Appendices..... | 40 |
| Works Referenced..... | 43 |

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ABSTRACT

Coalitions challenge group members' assumptions and categorical memberships through the incorporation of varying standpoints, subsequently shifting discourse in accordance with coalition members' aims. The collective "we" of coalescing individuals must acknowledge their imperfect knowledge and intersecting privileges and oppressions in order to interrogate and dismantle systemic disadvantage while moving toward the ultimate goal of reallocation of power through coalition. This study examines the coalition process through interviews with leaders of locationally similar student groups at AU which ally/network under a "feminist umbrella." This feminist umbrella includes student organizations focused on promoting gender equality, social justice, diversity and inclusiveness through their initiatives on campus. Investigating student organizations' coalition building activities sheds light on 1. the standpoints and intersectionalities involved as groups work jointly and 2. the challenges these pose in the process of creating alliances and networks among campus groups.

INTRODUCTION:

Examining and exploring systems of oppression and power is one of the foundational building blocks of feminist scholarship. Feminist scholars of myriad locations continually identify weaknesses, strengths, and ‘missing links’ within existing epistemologies, consciously acknowledging the organic and evolutionary characteristics of feminism as a theoretical development. This consciousness is shown particularly within theoretical intersections and overlaps: feminist scholars draw from numerous theories to articulate unmet theoretical needs or inclusions, simultaneously enriching and furthering feminist epistemology and surrounding discourse.

The prevalence of theoretical overlapping and tuning reminds me of an orchestral harmony, with each unique feminism and theoretical approach as an instrument and the melodious sound produced representative of feminist discourse as a whole. This eloquence and cooperative imagery piqued my interest in coalition building with the following questions ringing as distinct chords for exploration and conversation:

- How can intersectionality inform and support coalition building framework or efforts? How can this be problematic or detrimental?
- How can intersectionality accommodate dialogue across standpoints as a foundation for coalition building?
- Why is coalition building important? Why should/do we coalesce?

DEFINITIONS:

To ensure clarity in articulation for the reader and within my own theorizing, I base my analysis and critique on the following definitions and scope:

Standpoint: A standpoint approach posits that a standpoint is “a way of making sense of social processes and structures that can be developed from the resources available to a particular social location.” (Sprague; 2005) Systemic inequalities and inherent privileges stemming from membership in constructed categories create variations among seemingly similar standpoints. For example, women’s standpoints, collectively, vary drastically when individual experiences are examined-- black woman, black-immigrant woman, white woman, white immigrant woman. Standpoint theorists “endeavor to develop a feminist epistemology, or theory of knowledge, that delineates a method for constructing effective knowledge from the insights of women’s experience.” (McCall; 2005) Furthermore it can be asserted that all knowledge is partial and inherently incomplete, due to knowledge and authority stemming from social constructions and not without bias. There is no absolute knowledge or neutral objectivity. (c.f. Collins, Haraway, Hartsock, Kirk.)

Intersectionality: Feminist theory striving to explore and examine the way(s) socially and culturally constructed categories intersect and interconnect to oppress and uphold societal inequalities. Constructed categories, such as race/class/sex, are used to classify and organize members in society but do not act as independent agents-- categories are interconnected and interlocking. Much like absolute knowledge, it is impossible to separate singular categories from an individual as a whole. (c.f. McCall, Crenshaw, Collins, Settles, Rich)

Coalition: Coalitions exist as a network of various and complexly identified intersubjects, mutually convinced of the need to challenge complex domination. (Fowlkes, 1997)

Sustainable/Cohesive: Coalitions challenge the complex systems of power inequalities, referred to as the “matrix of domination” by Patricia Hill Collins, acting to oppress subsets of the human population (subset oppression based on membership in categories such as: race, gender, sexuality, class etc.). Consciously framing individual oppressions as simultaneously experienced forms of domination, and relating this individually localized oppression to others’ simultaneous oppressions and privileges, enables coalescing. (Fowlkes, 1997) A cohesive coalition, I believe, exists as a network and support system of engaged individuals striving to deconstruct matrices of domination in contemporary contexts. Continuous discourse and creative inquiry will move us to understand different views on same subject, this in turn will propel theory and movement forward, what I call a sustainable or cohesive coalition. (Kirk, 2007)

Feminist Umbrella: I believe the “feminist umbrella” to consist of groups which have established ties and an active voice in fostering feminist-based political and social justice issues and programming on campus. This includes gender identity, sexuality, women’s rights, and freedom of choice.

LITERATURE REIVEW & CRITIQUE:

Within feminist analysis and deconstructions, both intersectionality and standpoint theories are used as tools to approach the same issues. Learning and understanding the themes and tones of epistemological text as a singular approach, while exploring each theoretical approach has sounded a number of nuanced strengths and weaknesses. I will briefly examine each theory, noting positive and negative applications in regards to coalition building, while attempting to articulate the subtle differences between two oft conflated theories.

Standpoint approach, created as a developing theory in its own right and as a response to traditional feminist scholars criticized for essentializing women's experiences as unilateral, posits that knowledge is "not the spontaneous thinking of a person or a category of people. Rather, it is the combination of resources available within a specific context from which an understanding might be constructed." (Sprague; 2005) This presents scholars with an inclusive way to examine women's unique lived experiences.

In accounting for each element of a standpoint: location, interests with regard to that location, discourses that provide tools for making sense of this location, and position in social organization of knowledge production; a researcher can explore and understand an individual, or collective, standpoint. (Haraway, 1978) This vantage point, or standpoint, effectively politicizes an individual's identity. Using it as a basis for knowledge production and foundational theorizing grounds discourse and scholarship within a framework of 'real-life' experiences. (c.f. Collins, Haraway, Hartsock, Kirk.)

Standpoint theory reframes epistemology within the unique experience of human life, accounting for interlocking oppressions working to dominate and suppress individual

agency. (Patricia Hill Collins, 2004) However, standpoint theory in all its incorporation and inclusiveness may simply present an equally essentializing theory.

Consciousness and relativism within location and oppressions provides a theoretically inclusive framework able to account for individualized and lived experiences. In assuming a universal experience of “woman,” for example, provides a limiting and confining categorization of oppressions. Patricia Hill Collins notes the importance of grounding theories within the reality of individual location, “Subordinates see the world from location, but must know how to navigate dominant culture to survive. All locations provide a partial view, but some locations enable or disable knowledge production with ease-- such as a hegemonic standpoint.” (Patricia Hill Collins, 2004) These interconnected oppressions are not without advantages, women for example experience moments of privilege and oppression simultaneously. To ensure a non-essentializing standpoint, it is imperative to recognize one’s location: “being aware and conscious of position in society and its inherent privileges.” (Rich, 1979) Vantage points must be reexamined, decoded and deconstructed to effectively locate the social-historical context of inherent assumptions within scholarship and discourse. (Haraway, 1988)

Within coalition building efforts, standpoint theory *can* account for each member’s locational concerto. In spite of this, over-individualizing experiences can also present a self-centeredness and sedulous inclusiveness which is problematic for creating a harmonizing orchestra of a coalition. Without accounting for cultural relativism and inherent assumptions within individual location, the coalition serves as a new arena for oppressive and subconsciously essentializing efforts. I believe the standpoint approach is

important to use as the starting notes of a coalition, but should not be relied on exclusively to create or sustain a coalition's composition.

Contrasting the inclusiveness and individualizing experiences held within a standpoint theoretical framework, intersectionality explores the categories of organization within societal hierarchies and oppressions: "Knowledge of women's lives can be developed to inform effective strategies for change; differences among women shape experiences but overall oppressions construct a singular unique perspective on society to challenge male domination." (Hartsock, 1983) Hartstock furthers this assertion, taking extreme care to specifically distinguish a standpoint from the spontaneous consciousness of a category of social actors: "a standpoint is achieved rather than obvious, a mediated rather than immediate understanding." (Sprague; 2005) Focusing on the individual within a category, and noting how powerful socially constructed categories actually are: women are not intrinsically different than men, patriarchal power relations produce difference senses of self, and localizing individual self within areas without power enables critique and alternative visions. (Haraway, 1988) Exploring why categories or positions hold the power to privilege and oppress individuals is fundamental to feminism, however intersectionality strikes two distinct chords fundamental to coalition building: Does intersectionality deconstruct or reify categories of oppression?

Narratives suggest intersectionality is integral to understanding difference and finding hidden similarities within individual group membership. Knowledge of women's lives can be developed to inform effective strategies for change; differences among women shape experiences but the precise location within a socio-historical context provides an opening for developing knowledge about the social world and how it

functions. (Hartsock, 1988; Sprague; 2005) Identifying and holding ties to multiple categories may provide advantages and disadvantages. Individuals experience benefits from membership in multiple groups, but can experience increased discrimination, for example: black women experience pride as a woman and pride as black. However these women are subject to dualistic discrimination on the grounds of both categories. Feminist epistemologies and efforts need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how social world is constructed and how power is distributed. (Crenshaw, 1995) Examining the social construction of categories of organization and the intersectionality of oppressions across categories, feminists can deconstruct categories of oppression.

The deconstruction of oppressive categories and hierarchical organization can be a useful tool in examining intersections of power distribution and privilege/oppression within society, however intersectionality may inherently reify the categories it seeks to dismantle. Singular subjectivity, requires a group to organize around **one** dimension of identity to act on. Requiring that, for the purpose of solidarity and progress, members who identify in other dimensions defer action against other oppressions. (Fowlkes, 1997) Ignoring other categories in coalition building unintentionally creates hierarchy of oppression, similar to ones which intersectionality seeks to deconstruct. This favoritism, in turn, reifies the oppressive categories creating a cyclical oppression within intersectional feminism.

Working within the conceptualized framework of categories, as a means to dismantle and interrogate socially constructed oppressions and organizational hierarchy, is at the heart of any revolution. I believe that through understanding and re-

conceptualizing/re-framing socially constructed categories, individuals can explore ways in which systems of power impact their individual standpoint. This will, in turn ultimately increase knowledge production and affect change on a localized and universalized scale.

Exploring how an individual categorizes facets in one's own life can shed light on subconscious privileges and oppressions within individual conceptualizations of the socially constructed world order. Without understanding and locating individual bias within the social world order and how we are situated within interconnecting categories, discourse will only serve to reflect hegemonic oppressions it strives to deconstruct. This situational and standpoint awareness will require an informed acknowledgement of privileges and oppressions within self, and a consciousness necessary to enable dialogue and collectively move discourse. In understanding prejudices and '-isms' within our own self, and interrogating our own location in the hierarchy and the privileges/oppressions it provides, can we actively participate in an informed dialogue and deconstruct systemic oppressions.

Standpoint theory and intersectionality can, I believe, accommodate coalition building. The knowledge gained at intersecting oppressions provides stimulus for theorizing, networking and coalescing, (Patricia Hill Collins, 2004) while the knowledge of women's unique lives can be developed to inform effective strategies for change. (Hartsock, 1988) For example, black women as a group remain oppressed and marginalized; however not all at the same time and not exclusively. (Patricia Hill Collins, 2004) Within coalition building, this individualized standpoint can shed light on the 'missing notes' which are not fully realized. Intersubjective standpoints allows and

requires us to recognize the legitimacy of partial knowledge and the long-term effectiveness of coalition politics as coordinated, multiple plans of action. No collective singular “woman,” but instead dialoguing across standpoints and intersectionalities will allow supportive challenges to complex systems of domination. (Fowlkes, 1997)

Within a coalition, a prioritization of ‘issues’ or problems is imperative, without selecting one issue or set of issues and attempting to focus on accounting for differences and individualized oppressions, a coalition is at a standstill-- each instrumental section and instrument wanting an equal number of beats within a composition, there is no harmony. As time has shown, members can coalesce without abandoning ideals, when each section bows to the most pressing needs of the coalition at that moment in time. Bridging across standpoints can accommodate this harmonious cohesion. Not all members are cohesive on all issues, but as intersectionality and coalition member’s priorities and needs permit. For example, black men and women, and feminists collectively have accomplished significant goals and affected change through social movements. However, the two similarly situated groups were not necessarily in concert at all points in time.

Bridging can also be problematic within coalitions. A universality of gender-based oppressions omits important differences related to other categories and identities. The collective “woman” bridges across sex categories, however can be over-generalizing and simplifying women’s individual standpoints. Splitting energies across groups, bridging, can provide intersectional disempowerment, such as black women within the feminist or black movements. Marginalized within each community and subsequently falling in the space between each group “on the bridge” creates other-ing or tokenism

within coalitions. Voyeuristic inclusion is only marginally less disempowering than complete exclusion. (Crenshaw, 1995)

Exploring how individual identities are ordered, such as (race, sex, education, ethnicity), provides insight into personal politicization and hierarchy of identity. Awareness of ordering or non-ordering can lead to understanding of other group organizations. (Settles, 2006) Prioritization can accommodate dialogue and knowledge production on interconnecting threads unrestrained by categories or standpoints. I believe exploring this interconnected standpoint demonstrates the fundamental need to incorporate both theories within coalition and movement efforts.

METHODS:

Introduction & Strategy

I will explore how power has clustered around categories and is exercised against others, (Crenshaw, 1995) and how standpoints can be utilized as a tool for conscious reexamination and exploration of coalescing methods. Coalitions, I believe, challenge assumptions and categorical membership through the incorporation of standpoints, subsequently moving discourse in accordance to member's needs. That collective "we," of coalescing individuals, must acknowledge imperfect knowledge and inherent privileges and oppressions to effectively dismantle and interrogate systemic oppressions-- ultimately commanding a reallocation of power through coalescing. (Fowlkes, 1997)

Framing coalitional objectives as hinging upon the collective strength of its members, instead of individual or categorical rights will broaden and strengthen feminist coalitions, and ideally create a powerful social movement to affect and deconstruct systemic oppressions. Complexities arise when exploring multiple dimensions of identity politics, which I believe is inherent in coalition building efforts drawing from standpoint theory alone. As mentioned, no individual subscribes to only one category or generalized standpoint, however interrogating the boundary process itself and acknowledging the necessity of categories within a social-historical and organizational process, provides arena for exploring complex lived-experiences within each group. A coalition's cohesiveness, I believe, is determined through how members incorporate and dialogue across partial knowledge-- the orchestral strength found in the melodic unity of partial knowledge.

It is from the unifying incorporation of standpoint and intersectionality theories that I will explore and question:

- How do on-campus student groups strategically network, connect, and ally to foster and strengthen an agenda reflective of inclusivity?
- Which, if any, groups within the “feminist umbrella” are marginalized within the campus hierarchy? What is the basis for marginalization?
- How might this be reflective of coalitional challenges in feminist movements?

The answers to these questions, I believe, will surface through interviews with student groups categorized within the “feminist umbrella” and a thorough understanding/analysis of American University’s student government and student group organizational system.

Examining an existing hierarchical system and interviewing leaders of student groups which ally/network with locationally similar student groups, locates my research within active discourse and coalescing on campus. I define the ‘feminist umbrella’ to include student organizations focused on promoting social justice, gender egalitarianism, diversity, and inclusiveness as the primary on-campus initiatives. Interviewing students empowered--and often elected--to create, modify, and manage student groups under the feminist umbrella ensures that interviewees are not othered or oppressed within the researcher/interviewee relationship. (Sprague, 2005)

Questioning student groups to acknowledge inclusion/exclusion of groups which fall under the “feminist umbrella” will, I believe, shed light on the standpoints and intersectionalities at work in building allies.

This inclusion/exclusion within similarly situated student groups will allow my research to briefly explore the challenging complexities found within coalitional

cohesion, while distancing individual interviews from the organizational structures as a whole. In focusing the interview on the organizational goals and system of organization itself I intend to alleviate, to some degree, the unequal power relationship between researcher/interviewee.

Organizations: (which/why?)

Within American University's active student body and rapidly growing Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies departments, a strong feminist support system has been established. I believe that American University, as a collective whole, is accepting of liberal gender-based issues and feminist teachings. The groups I have selected and intend to explore under this "feminist umbrella," and briefly why I selected each groups are as follows:

- American University Club Council. *AUCC allocates and distributes funding to student groups on campus. They will be crucial to understanding the systems of organization on campus.*
- Community Action and Social Justice Coalition. *"CASJC serves as a resource center for students working for responsible social change through spiritual-centered activism."*
- Disability Alliance. *This past Fall, the Disability Alliance sponsored an event focused on sexuality and disabilities; further demonstrating the diversity within the feminist umbrella.*
- Students for Choice. *"The purpose of this organization is to threefold: 1) to organize and engage American University students around issues of reproductive health and justice, particularly issues regarding choice and working to protect these rights, 2) To coordinate coalitions between various clubs and organizations regarding issues of reproductive justice and choice and 3) To ensure that AU students are aware of the reproductive health resources available to them on campus, in Washington, DC and in their hometowns."*

- Queers and Allies, including: Transgender Advocacy Project, Queer Women's Advocacy Committee, and Ally Initiatives. *"AU Queers and Allies seeks to raise the visibility of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) students through advocacy, programming, and community service opportunities. We also provide straight allies the opportunity to learn and advocate for their LGBT friends and family."*
- Women's Initiative, including: Director, communications/outreach, Men's Outreach, Stopping Violence Against Women, Women's Empowerment, Sex Education. *Women's Initiative has undergone significant changes the past few years, most recently there has been a significant change in which groups WI allies with. This feminist-focused networking has broadened event partnership and campus wide networking among student groups.*

Approach to Analysis:

I will analyze interviews based on responses to a set list of questions (see Appendix 1) conducted over a 30 minute recorded interview. The topics I intend to question and explore will include: allies/non-allies, programming topics, funding, perception of location within the hierarchy, prevalence of feminist issues on agenda/programming. The conversations and interviews held with members of the ‘feminist umbrella’ at American University will be firmly grounded in the initial research questions. However all analytical framework will examine the gaps in which American University’s feminist umbrella operates, including which groups are marginalized within similarly motivated student groups. Reflecting on and analyzing those outside or below the feminist umbrella, I believe, will shed light on the dominating forces within the University system. This analytical approach is strengthened through an exploration of organizational goals and objectives: policy changes, student benefits, or programming/awareness raising initiatives.

To ensure an adequate analysis the interview responses will undergo a standpoint *and* intersectionality theory framework application; drawing primarily from Leslie McCall’s epistemological approach. McCall notes the complexities of intersectionality methodology and calls for an interrogation of the boundary process itself while acknowledging the interconnected relationships categories represent at any point in time. (McCall, 2005) I feel this approach reflects the multiplicity of intersectionality within the locus of self, and to ignore the implications within an organization is indicative of “favoring methodologies that more naturally lend themselves to the study of complexity and rejects methodologies that are considered too simple or reductionist.” (McCall, 2005)

In analyzing complex and interconnected individuals and categories, a simple approach maintains continuity and forces the researcher to address fundamental issues-- which I intend to do through this research.

It is through this approach that I will focus on disseminating which groups on campus subscribe to each theory when organizing their focused student groups, and how leaning towards each theory could be limiting or freeing in regards to achieving policy or programming initiatives. I will then note trends in student groups on campus and explore if a correlation between intended objectives and networking exists, and what that correlation represents.

Limitations:

This project's limitations exist within the analysis and application of data towards a more complex and fluid coalition politics. I believe that a coalition survives and coheres based upon its members, however within American University each group has a limited timeframe to coalesce and become involved. I perceive this as a limitation due to long-term group goals, however it may prove to be a significant strength in transitions of power and coalescing. The weaknesses in this study also lie in the inherent privileges associated with attending a top-tier university, all students I interview will have comparable credentials to pursue undergraduate studies at American University. However, I believe acknowledging and examining these privileges and category subscriptions are fundamental in researching standpoint and intersectionality theories--all knowledge is partial. It is the collective knowledge which moves discourse.

RESULTS:

*Organizational Framework:*¹

Nearly each of the nine student organizations interviewed identified Directors in a distinct way: two groups appointed directors by graduating-Directors at the close of an academic year, a newly founded group's Director was self-appointed, one group was a 'student collective' with an equal distribution of power and responsibilities among co-facilitators, one Executive Director was elected by the general body-- while four of the subcategory Directors simply applied for the positions. Each Director and/or Co-Director is the primary spokesperson for the student organization while ensuring additional responsibilities are completed. All interviewees indicated that Directors are responsible for meeting organization, event planning and creation, general oversight of the organization and management, and fiduciary planning/tracking for the academic year.

Due to the diversity of interviewed student group's American University affiliations, fund generation and allocation varied widely. Student organizations categorized within American University Club Council (AUCC), of which 3 organizations fall under, are required to apply annually for funding. The application consists of a intricately detailed budget, listing of previous events (including attendance, funding necessary, publicity of each event, etc.), and an explanation of why each event is necessary and beneficial to the AU community. Upon an award of an annual budget, each student club/organization must fundraise or generate approximately 10% of their award to supplement the initial budgetary request. Notably, all three organizations within this AUCC subset approached barriers to funding in drastically different methods: one

¹ Please see Table 1 in Appendix 2 for concise information within this section.

group actively fundraised, one group did not fundraise at all and relinquished a portion of their annual budget, while one group “overshot our budget by double the amount we might need.” (Interviewee 4)

One student club, did not fall under the AUCC directly but was a collective of representatives of numerous student clubs/organizations. Each co-facilitator is a Director or leader of another student organization/club on campus, which is granted funding through AUCC. These co-facilitators donate a portion of their budget to the collective, share resources, and support to the collective and its objectives.

Groups interviewed which fall outside the scope of AUCC are instead under the administration of American University Student Government (AUSG). The primary organization is required to apply for funding through a detailed budget, similar to the process for AUCC, however subgroups within this organization are not provided a set-budget. Instead the sub-groups, 4 total interviewed, must request funding allocations from the primary organization on an event-by-event basis. All student groups interviewed followed similar processes, allocating funds on an idea-by-idea, event-by-event, or major-event basis.

Organizations identified at excelling in terms of organizing and programming events included: Queers & Allies (5:9), Women’s Initiative (4:9), and AUS4C (2:9). Within each student organization identified several key theories-of-success were posited by interviewees: empowering organization’s members, strong leadership, organized as a whole, strong support base to draw from, co-sponsorship and outreach initiatives, and room for organization’s internal growth.

Agendas:

Almost all groups determined programming and/or events at the beginning of each semester, referencing past ‘successful’ events as a starting point for programming initiatives. Student groups also called for programming suggestions and ideas at general interest meetings, LIST-SERV email distributions, and leadership ingenuity.²

The primary goals of organizations and subsequently their programming/events, identified through interviews, fell within similar categories among all organizations. Increased membership, visibility on campus, inclusiveness, solidarity, networking, raising awareness on issues and club diversity were mentioned almost unanimously in all interviews. Inclusion was primarily defined to include diversity among issues surrounding sexuality and gender expression, four groups mentioning inclusion specifically defined it this way. These goals often superseded the promoted ideology of the organization, only two groups interviewed actively described goals in-line with the promoted goals of the organization.

Groups interviewed noted, unsurprisingly, that the organizations with similar agendas and programming initiatives fell under the “feminist umbrella,” as defined earlier in this paper. Women’s Initiative received the most support, while outliers were surprising: Greek Life, Native American communities, academic departments, and student political organizations such as Young Democrats. Albeit not having similarly situated goals of an organization, the interviewed student organizations categorized under the feminist umbrella identifying with the outliers expressed that organization and

² It should be noted that one group in particular did not follow this model, “I’m very conscious in not doing anything I think of. Where I come from as a feminist may not be where the men I want to reach out to come from...” This departure from the standard model is striking. The interviewee expressed reflexivity and focalized programming efforts on the organization’s primary goal of diversity and reaching out to new allies and throughout AU’s campus.

leadership were the largest areas of identification. It should be noted that one organization did not feel that any organizations have similar agendas or programming initiatives and hesitated to draw any false connections both among student organizations and AU administrative offices.

Student organizations interviewed unanimously stated a collaboration on agendas and programming initiatives, some more frequently throughout the academic year than others. Collaboration on agendas is not necessarily a first-step in organizing programming, but comes out of individual students looking to become involved with the organization or interested in an unsponsored type of event.

Networking:

All organizations interviewed noted, with varying degrees of frequency, that their group regularly pairs or co-sponsors events with other student organizations. Reasons for pairing with other organizations included: reconnecting with organizations that have distanced, increased membership through awareness, financial support, unification of events, publicity, strengthen supportive audience and to create a “successful event.”³ The organizations identified as consistent co-sponsors within the feminist umbrella clustered around: CASJ, Queers & Allies, Women’s Initiative, feminist-identifying student organizations, AU Students For Choice (AUS4C), and the GLBTA Resource Center.

Surprisingly, the organizations interviewed within the ‘feminist umbrella’ explained that working with these organizations was “just easier” (Interviewee 5) and “involved with feminist organization.” (Interviewee 2) When questioned about how it

³ Connotations of a “successful event” are beyond the scope of this paper. However, I find it problematic that an event’s success, implied through these interviews, is determined by the number in attendance instead of the quality of programming and awareness an event generates.

was 'easier,' one interviewee responded that "my close group of friends are the people who run the clubs. We pick them because they are the feminist voices on campus."

(Interviewee 5) Although I cannot fully draw any conclusions within the scope of this paper, the reasoning presents an intriguing future research question.

Following this question, interviewees were asked to name their 'favorite organizations to pair with,' unsurprisingly the unanimous answer clustered around the organizations they already and consistently pair with. However, one interviewee expressed fault in this style of organizing: "The problem with organizing on campus is you become part of a bubble and organizing with the same people over and over again. I'll admit I fell into that bubble..." (Interviewee 7) Furthering this bubble-suggestion, one interviewee noted that "a lot of the groups I love working with are groups that are involved...because they have membership in the collective." (Interviewee 2)

Contrary to the mentality of co-sponsorship, the majority of student organization interviews believed that no organizations best compliment their own agenda. This significant finding, and its implications in regard to student organization activism on campus, was surprising in that organizations and interviewees actively expressed their favorite organizations and frequent co-sponsorship.⁴

Student Organizations interviewed almost unanimously noted a desire to work with Diversity clubs/organizations (organizations which focus on multiculturalism, for example) on campus and Student Government, but have not yet done so. When asked about barriers or reasons for not working together thus far, respondents noted significant, and startling, reasons clustering around leadership. Continuing to exist within the

⁴ Please see Discussion section for further analysis

feminist 'bubble,' interviewees noted "we should have worked with them sooner but because of the very distinctive feminist circle... we help each other all the time."

(Interviewee 5) and "Because they're not in the same social groups in terms of hanging out. That's where most of the organizing work starts out. It's tremendously hard to bridge that.. And create a professional relationship." (Interviewee 7) while others focused on "leadership and who is the point-person on the event, how they follow through and what their responsibilities are." (Interviewee 9) or bluntly, "limited time, energy and outreach potential [within the organization]." (Interviewee 6) However, all student groups interviewed asserted that there are zero organizations which they would never work with, exceptions being an organization which drastically opposed their mission.

Policy Influence & AU Hierarchy:

Student Organizations interviewed expressed a significant amount of power, authority and influence on University policies, practices and programming (8:9 groups indicated significant pull). The methods and strategies to affect change objectives varied across organizations interviewed: "Our influence on policy has not always been direct, AU's created a lot of rules about appropriate ways to protest," (Interviewee 2) "must make noise and be bothersome to create change. It's scary how much power we have," (Interviewee 4) "We have a representative on Student Government," (Interviewee 3) while others deferred to the overarching Director of their organization to achieve sub-group goals.

Consistent with activism on campus, vocalization and persistency was key to achieving change objectives. Most groups noted a slow and constant work in progress or that the University is not fully understanding of the change objectives. However, in spite

of this strong activism and vocalization on campus, groups interviewed expressed middle-ground confidence in their success.

Discussion:***Organizational Framework:***

A challenge for all student organizations on campus, both at American University and across the nation, is determining leadership positions and the individuals best suited to oversee the organization as a whole. Within each student organization at AU, power is allocated through a rigid hierarchical system, with only slight variations among each group. This unequal distribution of power creates a subtle catch-22 within organizations under the scope of the 'feminist umbrella' on campus. Although this provides undergraduate students with an opportunity for leadership and program oversight, it also creates a singular point-of-contact in charge of defining the organization's mission, position and is given the majority of overall power. Within self-identifying feminist organizations, under the 'feminist umbrella,' on AU's campus the transitions of power and distribution exist in rapid turnover-- changing leadership with each academic year, or in some cases a semester.

Reflecting challenges posed within feminist movements, AU's student organizations and leadership appear to struggle in the transitions of power and determining the allocation of power. Creating a hierarchical distribution of power and appointing or electing the next leader of a student organization requires potential leadership to identify and align with qualities and categories relevant to the previous leadership's ideals. This is similar to the referencing and ordering of individual identities and singular-standpoint adherence criticized within larger coalition building efforts. (cf. Hill Collins, Fowlkes, Settles) Not aligning with the current leaderships' categories or organizational standpoints, could place a potential leader in paradox and jeopardize their

opportunity to lead the organization into the upcoming academic year. This is similar to preferencing individual categories or membership within a feminist movement overall, denying the importance of category multiplicity. (Fowlkes, 2005) Conscious of the upcoming transition of power within such a short time-frame presents another dimension of organizing and membership favoritism for an organization's leadership.

This power distribution is particularly demonstrated within the fiduciary objectives and distribution of a student organization. The process of obtaining funding from the University, be it AUCC or AUSG, relies on the previous year's leadership and recognition/repetition of programming events defined as "successful." Financially, this is primarily determined through event attendance and secondary the low costs of event programming. Each group interviewed relied on previous year's events to determine programming goals during the current academic year, a repetition of previous leadership's events demonstrates the longstanding power each designated organization leader holds-- even after transitioning to an alumni.

The hierarchal distribution of power among student organization's leadership, and loss of power by its supportive members, frames the collective "we" within stringent categorical boundaries. Similar to the boundaries and inherent privileging within feminism as a whole, such as middle-class white women dominating the feminist movement during the first and second waves, restricts radical programming changes which might present an ideologically polar approach to an organization's history-- albeit grounded in the mission of an organization as a whole. This ultimately diminishes the power allocated to an organization's individual members. I believe that this limitation in student organizing is reflective of challenges posed to any coalition or movement striving

for inclusivity and diversity. It is essential to question the reasoning for and behind the legacy of power and the continued presence, without direct involvement, of student organization leadership. Can movements propel forward and organically change to meet the needs of a current student population, if a student organization relies on previous leadership's ideas and initiatives? How much change annually is reasonable, is it ultimately effective or ineffective given the rapid turnover of leadership at AU? Although these questions are beyond the scope of this paper, I feel they are important to consider when reflecting on student group's organizational leadership and structure.

Agenda:

Constructing a calendar of intended events at the beginning of each academic year, upon transition of leadership power, is a necessity in all student organizations. However, crafting an organization's goals inclusive of past events and perceived 'successful' events subconsciously favors and values select organizing themes over others. This valuation, although congruent with steps in determining an agenda to organize and structure programming, places higher preference on previous year's membership interests and suggests a higher value in their identity categories. Implying, although subtly, that previous year's membership and/or leadership has a higher priority in determining appropriate or projecting successful programming in following academic years.

Adopting historical programming standpoints and ideologies of past leadership is not in and of itself flawed, however the repetition of agendas and programming is currently without necessary reflexivity as a whole. This is not to say that all student organizations are essentializing or intentionally exclusionary, however it does create a

culture and ideology of a singular mentality. This has been noted among leadership however that current programming and organization is systematically favoring a narrower agenda than, I believe, is intended. Narrowing an organization's programming weakens agendas and goals towards inclusivity and diversity. In not accounting for the multiplicity of members and alternatively drawing programming ideas exclusively from collective membership or objectives striving towards inclusivity or diversity, student organizations emulate the lack of reflexivity many feminist movements are often criticized for.

In premising programming agendas on previous perceptions of 'success' an imperfect assumption is created, relying on assumed values and interests of a student organization's membership in following years. This actively rejects reflexivity within an organization's leadership and structure, by allocating power and programming interests to previous membership and leaders. Fowlkes notes the importance of redistributing power in coalescing individuals, as the collective 'we' is organic and in flux. (Fowlkes, 1997) Presuming that all individuals within an organization's membership hold similarly situated standpoints, category subscription or lived-experiences and interests, creates significant gaps within an organization's leadership, programming goals, and current membership base. This is often reflected within feminist movements and has been a constant struggle to bridge singular and multiple gaps within coalitions and organizing objectives.

Networking:

Potentially the most significant revelation illuminated through the conducted interviews is found within networking and co-sponsorship strategies among student organizations. Contrary to the feminist ideologies and expressed goals of student

organizations within the feminist umbrella, such as inclusivity and diversity, the strategies and methods utilized on AU's campus instead marginalize student groups which fall outside the boundary-laden 'feminist umbrella'; subsequently undermining efforts towards inclusivity. This is a significant limitation both in the internal processes and the protected networking on AU's campus, as the campus itself is a privilege-protecting entity: high tuition, liberal courses of study, active student population, and academically rigorous.

The most striking networking strategy was to, in effect, trade favors and utilize social connections/friendships to increase event attendance and event congruency/unity across campus programming. This is underscored through cross-membership, and board leadership, across feminist organizations; inheriting leadership positions through membership and/or friendship with leaders of other organizations. Although networking is a fundamental component of forming a cohesive activist movement, especially within a college campus, focalizing allies and co-sponsorship within a "feminist bubble" can be problematic. McCall stresses the importance of questioning all boundaries and utilize reflexivity in expanding networking efforts, however AU's campus groups are currently working within an existing framework of easily-identified feminist organizations. (McCall, 2005) I believe that although this creates significant feminist oriented programming, it overlooks less-obvious allies and arenas for coalition building or activism; subsequently distancing the "feminist umbrella" from other student organizations and isolating activist efforts.

This is noted particularly in the self reflections of each organization's interview, in which individuals expressed no directly paralleling organization in terms of agenda's

or mission but instead retreated to organizing with familiar individuals-- ties established both personally and within campus activism. This networking strategy is theoretically founded on the premise of striving for inclusivity and diversity within the organization, in actuality it is unintentionally exclusionary and marginalizes groups which fall outside the 'feminist bubble' but potentially within the 'feminist umbrella'.

Categories and familiarity provide a sense of legitimacy and congruence on issues, however current American University student organizations are instead reflecting the longstanding institutional pattern many organizations succumb to. This pattern of comfort and working within a 'feminist bubble' is reflected within the feminist movement, connections are made based on common interests and categories. However, it is important to be inclusive across all categories of identity and standpoint-- something which the feminist movement continues to struggle with today. Although individual reflexivity exists, and was expressed by nearly all interviewees, it was contradicted in the methodological actions of the student organizations as a whole. Feminism and activism require a constant state of reflection and reflexivity-- a perpetual reevaluation of the constructs which the organization works within or for; not doing so, I believe, is a significant limitation within both student organizations at American University and feminist organizing as a whole.

Policy Influence & AU Hierarchy:

American University is reputed to have an active student voice and population on campus. All interviews reflected a sense of agency and voice towards affecting change on campus; however, perceived success was only marginal. I believe this is a symptom of consistent changes in leadership, high turnover rate of membership each academic

year, and the slow response time of University administration. Long-term and short-term goals fluctuate with each transition of power within a student organizations, creating a learning and motivational curve within the organization's efforts towards change. This suggests to individuals that change is marginally affective, instead of significant changes within a more individually localized realm of conception. I would suggest to leadership the importance of understanding the micro and macro activism and perhaps appoint multiple Directors or leadership to focus on each of the realms of activism. This would not only focus each group, but assist in dialoging across issues of importance and ultimately standpoints and locations.

The active voice and power to affect change are occasionally reflective of rigid hegemonic categories, which is surprising within organizations under the feminist umbrella. Albeit striving towards egalitarianism, categories do provide a culture of legitimacy and unearned power. One interviewee, to give due credit, was exceptionally reflexive and self aware and noted a sense of tokenism due to membership in specific gender, ethnicity, and sexuality categories. These instead propelled the individual to a higher level of regard, as explained, than was actually earned or deserved. Tokenism and privileges associated are also reflected in the larger feminist movements striving towards diversity and connections across categories. However, at American University I believe tokenism within the feminist umbrella is not intended but instead a symptom of the University's minimal diversity as a whole.

FINAL THOUGHTS & REFLECTIONS:

The inclusivity and diversity gaps, combined with overall struggles within student organizations on American University's campus are, I would venture, not unique. Feminism is a constantly evolving epistemology, ideology, and movement interpreted and embodied uniquely within each individual. Commonalities and intersections can sometimes be a struggle to find however intersectionality and standpoint-theory, combined with reflexivity and reevaluations, assist in providing a theoretical framework to initiate discourse.

In forming a coalition within the feminist movement bridging gaps, and enabling discourse, across locations and categories are imperative to assist in cohesion and propulsion. I believe that American University student groups, under the feminist umbrella, struggles and experiences parallel the challenges within nearly every coalition building, or feminist, movement.

As demonstrated within the American University 'feminist umbrella' student organizations, downplaying the importance of intersectionality hinders dialoging across standpoints and categories-- even student organizational categories-- which, in turn, undermines the central tenants and goals towards inclusivity and diversity. Although these are conscious, it is imperative to require an interrogation of boundaries and conscious reflexivity in regards to student organization practices, strategies, and co-sponsorship. Neglecting to do so, intentionally or unintentionally, creates a "feminist bubble" which, as one interviewee noted, "is tremendously hard to bridge."

I would recommend that student organizations within the feminist umbrella, and potentially across campus:

1. Evaluate the core issues and ultimate goals, the mission statement in effect, of their individual organization.
2. Determine the long and short term goals which reflect their mission statement
3. Actively share and dialogue collectively with student groups on campus to identify similarly oriented organizations
4. For those organizations which fall outside the ‘feminist umbrella’, evaluate ways in which dialogues or connections could be made. What issues might be relevant to other organizations? The campus as a whole?

Although these suggestions are not without limitations or flaws, I believe it is a starting point for feminist organizations on AU’s campus to initiate dialogue and bridge some of the current gaps within the activist movement on campus, as noted in their interviews.

This is not to assume or disregard any current attempts which the organizations are currently doing, but recommendations in response to the gaps which conducted interviews suggested.

I believe that intersectionality can inform and support coalition building efforts at American University’s campus, in that student organizations under the ‘feminist umbrella’ have placed erroneous boundaries around which organizations they actively co-sponsor with. In exploring and dialoguing across student organizations campus-wide, the feminist umbrella can be realized as significantly more inclusive and diverse. Feminism is not representative of singular categories, but an amalgam of feminist ideals-- continually redefined through student body membership and issues. This is not to say that feminism as an ideology, epistemology or movement is all-inclusive, however reasons for

exclusion or inclusion within feminism must be continually reevaluated to ensure consciousness, relativism and reflexivity.

The strategies implemented to network, connect, ally-- all to foster and strengthen AU's collective feminist agenda-- are the beginnings of incorporating inclusivity and diversity. All groups were aware of the need to focus on these tenants, to connect across categories and locations, to create a feminist coalition. I believe that with the rapid turnover of leadership and the limitations on student organizations as a whole prevent continuity of discourse and networking. Each year presents new leaders, which must in turn create new connections, allies, and a timed-coalition. Although some tenants remain constant, membership ideologies fluctuate with the transition of power upon the imminent departure of graduating leaders and members. The strength of a coalition, I firmly believe, is in the hands of its members. However, it is equally as important to have long-standing relationships and allies to affect coordinated change on campus: in effect, a sustainable coalition.

American University student groups exist because of students, of membership, and of leaders utilizing their individual voices. Within any movement struggles exist, however a college campus in and of itself challenges individual assumptions and perceptions upon entry. It is not a perfect catalyst for change, but it does provide a platform for individuals to utilize their individual and collective voices. To come together across categories and standpoints to affect change both within the University ecosystem and beyond.

The strength of a movement hinges upon its individuals, all members and leaders interviewed for this paper are strong. I cannot speak to the future of coalitions at

American University, however I can attest that the individuals leading the charge believe fully that it begins with one note, then one chord, until a symphony is born: a movement, an ideology, and eventually-- hopefully-- a diverse and inclusive coalition.

APPENDIX I: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Organizational Framework:

- How does your student group organize leadership positions? Standard
 - What are the primary responsibilities?
- How are funds generated? (Events, AUSG, etc.?) AUSC
 - How are funds allocated within the organization? Event basis, but not much \$\$
- Are there any organizations, in your opinion, that excel at organizing and programming? Q&A
 - Why do you think this is? Organized, large support base to draw from
 - Any that do not? Learning disabilities student group

Agendas:

- What are the primary goals of your organization? Diversity, awareness, inclusion
- How does the group determine goals/programming/events for the semester/year?

Discussion

- What are the goals of these events?
- Are events tailored around a specific theme or goal of the organization? Increase base
 - What is the driving force behind programming/goals?
- What other organizations do you feel have similar agendas/programming initiatives?
 - Collaboration on agendas? Q&A

Networking:

- How frequently does your organization pair with other student organizations?

Sometimes-- split though.

- Which groups? Q&A
- Why do you work with these groups in particular?
- What organizations are your “favorite” to work with and why? Least favorite?
- What organizations do you believe best compliment your organization’s agenda?
- Are there any organizations you have not had a chance to work with that you would like to? Student Gov’t
- What are the reasons for not working together thus far?

- Are there any organizations you would NEVER work with? (similar goals in mind) Not really

- Why?

Influences/Hierarchy:

- How does your position within the hierarchy influence policies? Practices? Programming?

- How well do you accomplish these? YES! Rep on student gov't

- How successful are you? Influencing policies on campus? Raising awareness?

APPENDIX 2: FIGURE 1

| Interviewee # | Organization Focus | Type |
|----------------------|--|-------------|
| 1 | Gender, Autonomy, Choice | AUCC |
| 2 | Autonomy, Social Justice, Activism, Student Rights | AUCC |
| 3 | Diversity, Sexuality | AUCC |
| 4 | Equality, Sexuality, Choice | AUCC |
| 5 | Sexuality, Gender, Choice, Diversity | AUSG |
| 6 | Gender, Activism, Choice, Rights | AUSG |
| 7 | Diversity, Activism, Rights, Empowerment | AUSG |
| 8 | Social Justice, Empowerment, Autonomy, Gender | AUSG |
| 9 | Empowerment, Gender, Diversity | AUSG |

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