

Educational Pedagogy and Sex Week by Louis J. Gross

Among the variety of trends in the US higher education system over the past decades has been an enhancement of opportunities for undergraduate students to develop critical thinking and problem solving skills. Much of this has been driven by changes in pedagogy which more closely aligns undergraduate education with the expectations long inherent in much of graduate education for student involvement in research and creative activity. These changes are consistent with a move away from considering a faculty member as a “sage on the stage”, passing on prescribed knowledge, and towards active-engagement in which the focus is not on “training” but on “mentoring”.

The changes have also been driven by workforce needs. Employers recognize the advantage of hiring those with appropriate skills as well as the capacity to utilize those skills in novel ways in collaboration with others. This aligns with educational research that evaluates the impact of alternative methodologies on learning, e.g. [scientific teaching](#), as well as with large Lumina-Gallup surveys that analyze the [impact education has had on an individual long after graduation](#) and indicate the importance of deep-learning experiences to workplace success. As noted in these surveys, empowering students to enhance their formal educational experiences with longer-term projects, involvement in extra-curricular activities, and establishing a close connection to a mentor have large impact on a student’s future well-being and work-life.

Higher education institutions in the US have a long history of student-driven extra-curricular programming. Typically, an “activities fee” is paid by students to provide for activities outside formal classroom courses, including athletics, clubs, lectures, concerts and those led by a host of student-run organizations. Although the explicit mechanism varies across institutions, the allocation of some portion of the available fees directly involves students in the process, sometimes through formal votes of the student body, and sometimes through a committee-structure that provides for student representation, arising sometimes from a student government structure.

A [web survey](#) of guidelines for allocation of student activities fees at ten public universities in the southeastern US found that in seven of the ten, the allocations were made by the student government or a committee consisting only of students, in one case made by a committee of students and staff (with more students than staff) and in two cases a committee of students and staff (with more students than staff) made a recommendation to a university administrator.

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville has a student program fee that generates over \$6M per year, of which approximately 11% is used to support student organized programming and allocated by a committee that consists of 40% students and 60% university staff. A very small fraction of the funds used for student programming (on average 2% over the past several years) has been allocated to [SEAT \(Sexual Empowerment and Awareness at Tennessee\)](#) a student organization that has led a yearly [Sex Week](#) collection of activities on topics of sexuality. SEAT

followed carefully all the appropriate procedures to request and expend funds throughout the period during which University policies were changed.

This set of activities organized by SEAT has generated considerable vituperative responses from the State Legislature over the past seven years, leading to a response by the University Administration and the Board of Trustees to modify allocation of the program fee that allowed students to “opt-out” of support from their program fee revenue for Black Cultural Programming, the Campus Events Board and student organization activities such as those sponsored by SEAT. A very large fraction of UTK students had not chosen to opt-out and Sex Week activities continued.

Not satisfied with the University’s response, the State Legislature requested the State Comptroller’s office to compile [a report](#) on Sex Week, resulting in a 269-page report issued in February 2019. The University of Tennessee response to this report was rapid with the President publishing a letter and the Board of Trustees acting to eliminate the prior Student Programming Allocation Committee which had responsibility for allocation of funds to support student organized programming. Funds are now to be allocated by the campus Chancellor after soliciting recommendations from the student government.

The set of actions by the University leadership are instructive. First, rather than continue to empower students to have significant authority for even the very small fraction of fees for which they previously had at least some say, this authority has now been completely assigned to an administrator with some vague potential student input. Implicit in this entire set of episodes is that students do not have the capacity to choose their own path on even the most basic decisions regarding activities on their campus supported by their own fees.

Second, in the face of continued attacks by elected officials, the University administration had urged the students involved in SEAT to alter the “descriptions and promotion” of Sex Week programs, which the students refused to do. The University has essentially “blamed the victim” with the implication that had students been willing to modify their program, the actions to remove student authority for allocation of student program fees would not have occurred.

Third, despite strong evidence that active participation and leadership in extra-curricular activities has long-lasting positive impacts on students’ future workplace success, the University clearly intends to defund Sex Week and any other activities that are deemed potentially controversial by the administration. The implication for students is that they should look elsewhere if they desire to have a broad range of opportunities for experiences that will benefit their long-term employment. The implication for employers is that the University does not consider its students capable of independent thought and action.

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