Faculty Advisors

Assessing Latina/o Cultural Nourishment:
The Role of University Cultural Centers

Nathan E. Cheesman, Isaac B. Kinsey,
Israel Laguer, and Mahauganee D. Shaw

This study connects existing research on university cultural centers and ethnic student identity construction. Through observation, we examined the extent to which programs provided by La Casa, Indiana University Bloomington's Latina/o cultural center, serve as a source of cultural nourishment. González's (2000, 2002) investigation of the experiences of self-identified Chicano college students framed this work. We will discuss the themes that emerged, as well as recommendations for practice and avenues for future research.

Regardless of the strength of a student's cultural identity, students of any ethnic minority search for a place to commune on campus (Watson, Terrell, Wright, Bonner II, Cuyjet, Gold, Rudy, & Person, 2002). Latina/o[1] student identity development theory strongly suggests a link between ethnic identity construction and acculturation in Latina/o college students (Alcoff, 2005; DeStephano, 2002; Evans, Forney, & Guido-Dibrito, 1998; Torres, Howard-Hamilton, & Cooper, 2003). These students often struggle with openly embracing and displaying aspects of their culture in a campus atmosphere where they feel isolated. In efforts to assist ethnic minority students in overcoming these feelings of marginalization and alienation (González, 2000), many campuses have established cultural centers aimed at serving their various ethnic student populations.

Cultural centers provide students with a social network of staff and faculty members, fellow students and members of the outside community who are attuned to their everyday needs and may serve as mentors, peers, resources, and allies. González (2000, 2002) considered these centers outlets for "cultural nourishment" (2000, p. 82) that may assist ethnic minority students in identifying with their campuses. Culturally nourishing aspects of a campus environment cultivate students' ethnic identity development and provide them with a sense of belonging. Cultural centers "exist to support ethnic students in pursuing their educational goals" (Jones, Castellanos, & Cole, 2002, p. 21), fostering their persistence through to graduation. They also teach students and the campus community at-large about a group's "cultures, traditions, practices, beliefs, and ancestry" (p. 22). In this way,

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1 In this study we have used "Latina/o" to refer to all Americans with heritage and descent from Central or South America. Throughout this document you will also see other terms such as "Chicano" which refer to a specific cultural distinction within the Latina/o population. We use these terms interchangeably due to their inclusion in the documents or programs that we have referenced. Even though these terms refer to specific distinctions, we propose that the instances in which they are included here may be extended to all Latina/os.

cultural centers cultivate opportunities for knowledge sharing and provide an additional campus learning environment.

In 1973, Indiana University Bloomington (IUB) established La Casa, the Latina/o cultural center, "focusing on uplifting Latino culture" (Hernandez, 2007, p.11). From its inception, La Casa's purpose and mission has been "to achieve through educational and social programs, a greater historical, political and cultural awareness regarding Latina/os" (Casillas, 2007). La Casa achieves this by providing events and programs to all students and members of the Bloomington community (L. Casillas, personal communication, October 1, 2007).

This study examines the extent to which La Casa's programs foster the nourishment of Latina/o culture. By utilizing González's framework (2000) as a foundation we focus and expand the idea of the "epistemological world" (González, p. 75). In its original form, the epistemological world examines the elements of campus culture that either encourage or impede cultural nourishment. Using this framework, we study the exchange of knowledge and information about Latina/o culture through La Casa's programming efforts.

Through an analysis of existing literature we provide an overview of our foundational framework and highlight research that discusses the dissemination and reception of knowledge among ethnic minorities on college campuses. We also present the methods by which information was collected, analyzed, and processed, and an explanation of our findings, including the themes and outcomes that resulted. Finally, we offer recommendations and implications for practical application. The purpose of this study is to provide insight for student affairs practitioners and community organizers who aim to gauge the effectiveness of programs and centers like La Casa.

Literature Review

Research into ethnic identity construction demonstrates that Latina/o students develop and embrace their ethnic identity at varying levels depending on four factors: (a) Their generational status, (b) parental influence, (c) self-perception of their ethnic identity, and (d) their social environment (Torres, Howard-Hamilton, & Cooper, 2003). Keefe and Padilla (1987) found that Latina/os who are second-generation through fourth-generation students in the American educational system arrived on college campuses less aware of their cultural heritage than their first-generation counterparts. Yet these students, despite their greater assimilation into American culture, still maintained as strong a sense of cultural identity and pride as that held by their first-generation peers.

Ethnic minority students on predominantly White campuses have a deep desire for a campus domain where they may leave the minority portion of their label at the door. Hefner (2002) emphasized that cultural centers are a beacon of hope which help retain students of color. For Latina/o students at IUB, La Casa is this place. Unlike White students, many of whom seldom contemplate their racial identity, students who belong to an ethnic minority group regularly struggle with the task of intermingling and blending their ethnic identity with the campus culture (Frankenberg, 1993). This task can interfere with these students' already daunting responsibility of adjusting to the academic demands of college life (Jones et al., 2002; Smedley, Myers, & Harrell, 1993). Therefore, ethnic minority students are placed at a further disadvantage from their White peers, impinging upon their ability to persist (González, 2000; Nora & Cabrera, 1996).

Campus cultural centers are critical to enhancing cross-cultural and racial interactions on predominantly white campuses (Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, & Allen, 1998). Many of these centers play a key role in helping students affirm a sense of identity and encourage them to become involved in all aspects of campus life (Hurtado, et al.). In a 2002 study of a predominantly White campus with no Latina/o cultural center, González's interviews of Chicano students revealed that they desired information on the history of their culture. This was seen through their description of their dorm room and the office of a Chicano professor as a place of solace from the general campus culture, even specifically referring to their dorm room as "the Chicano cultural center of the university" (p. 212). By offering an atmosphere that is both inviting and inclusive of individuals with whom these students identify, cultural centers create an environment conducive to learning and aids in fostering a strong sense of cultural awareness.

Framework

González (2000, 2002) found three elements within the campus environment that made Latina/o students feel both marginalized and alienated. He then classified these as the physical, social and epistemological worlds. When Latina/o culture is neglected within these aspects, the Latina/o students feel the effects of marginalization and alienation. However, when these aspects of the campus environment are inclusive of Latina/o culture, they intensify to the cultural nourishment of these students. We believe these elements can also be used to explain the differing sources of cultural nourishment. González (2000) asserted that these worlds exhibited "asymmetrical representations" (p. 75) of Latina/o culture, implying that one might be more important than another, thus encroaching on the Latina/o student's ability to feel welcome on campus. Working to create an understanding of the relationship between these worlds, we have depicted them as interlocking spheres of influence, rather than three loosely connected worlds.

The first element of asymmetrical representations experienced by Latina/o students in González's study is the physical world. This sphere is characterized by the layout of the campus, architecture of buildings, artwork, and symbols found on campus postings. González (2000, 2002) noted that the Latina/o students felt marginalized by the lack of relatable cultural representation in their physical world on campus.

The social world, the next sphere, is constructed of interactions with others—students, faculty, and staff members—in the campus community. This element represents daily interactions with persons of various ethnicities and cultures, the political power held by these groups on campus, and different languages spoken around campus (González, 2000, 2002). González found that the students were not accustomed to seeing other Latina/o persons on campus, did not feel as if the population of Latina/os found on campus had a significant influence on campus policies or initiatives, and felt alienated by other members of the community when speaking in their native tongue, Spanish. Since the efforts of González's study specifically focused on one campus entity, and not the entire university, we chose not to prioritize the physical and social elements of campus culture.

The final element is the epistemological world. This element is defined by the "knowledge that exists and is exchanged within various social spaces on campus" (González, 2002, p. 207). Sources of cultural nourishment within the epistemological world observed by González included campus settings where knowledge of Latina/o culture was shared and studied, as well as interactions with other Latina/os, both on and off campus. Our study focused on the knowledge of Latina/o culture within IUB, as disseminated through La Casa.

Using the epistemological world as our theoretical framework yielded a natural connection to our study location. The subjects in González's study (2000) "were more concerned…not [with] teaching non-Chicanos about Chicanos, but [with] creating an epistemological space on campus where Chicanos could share and discuss ideas about the Chicano community with each other" (p. 80). Though La Casa is not reserved specifically for Latina/o students, it serves the IUB community as an epistemological space where members of the campus community may learn, share and discuss ideas about Latina/o culture (González). This is further supported by La Casa's purpose: "to achieve through educational and social programs, a greater historical, political and cultural awareness regarding Latina/os" (Casillas, 2007). With this understanding we observed the programs and events sponsored by the Center, analyzed documents distributed during programs, and evaluated La Casa's epistemological promotion of cultural nourishment.

Methods

Information was obtained by attending a variety of La Casa's programs in order to get a first-hand view of the knowledge exchanged. Seven publicized La Casa programs were randomly selected and observed over the course of a two-month period. Five of these programs were analyzed for the purpose of determining the aspects of cultural nourishment visible in the programs. Table 1 shows information about the program topics and presenters and an overview of the programs. The other two were omitted because neither La Casa, nor its representatives or affiliates, were directly involved in their coordination or presentation.

Research Procedures

To help understand the epistemological world, we initiated data collection under our central concept: there is a broader scheme by which knowledge is disseminated, processed, and exchanged. Fundamentally, we gathered information to determine how the program presenters enlightened program attendees and to what extent these attendees contributed. These contributions were seen through the ways audience members communicated their personal knowledge of, and experiences with, the program topic.

Our team of researchers consisted of one African-American female, one African-American male, one European-American male and one Puerto Rican male. The diversity of ethnicity, cultural perspectives, and life experiences in our group strengthened our processes and analysis. Throughout the observational process, we attended the programs in alternating pairs to not only aid in analysis and reduce personal bias, but also to allow each person to focus on different aspects of the knowledge sharing process. While the extent of our past experiences with cultural centers directed our choice of topic, it did not figure into the selection of our research location or determine our research questions.

During the observations, the pairs manually recorded field notes to track the knowledge that was shared and how it was shared. For example, when an attendee asked a question, we recorded the question and if it was based directly on the knowledge shared in the program or if it was supported by the attendee's own knowledge. We noted the reactions of presenters and audience members, such as whether they verbally supported or opposed statements or if the conversation progressed without recognition of the previous comment. Following each program, the pair recapitulated in efforts to record all information possible and ensure accuracy.

Analysis

To further define our central concept, we categorized aspects of our observations under the following headings: (a) Presenters' interaction with

program attendees and learning outcomes, (b) the extent to which presenters made cultural distinctions, and (c) how actively attendees contributed to the knowledge sharing process. We referred to these three areas of observation as data indicators, which helped evaluate the effectiveness of the knowledge sharing process by revealing themes within La Casa's programming.

The first data indicator was the presenters' interaction with program attendees and the learning outcomes of each program. With this focus, we outlined the perceived assumptions presenters made about the audiences' general knowledge of their respective topics. This provided information regarding how presenters disseminated knowledge and whether articulated the information in ways relevant to the campus community. The observed learning outcomes helped determine how much the program aimed to expand the general knowledge base of the audience.

Our second indicator was the extent to which presenters made cultural distinctions within the context of their program. This information is significant for two reasons. First, this indicator was used to verify if the presenter was versatile and able to apply their topic area across the many backgrounds within the Latina/o culture. Secondly, it demonstrated how much of an effort the presenters made to engage audience members of different cultural backgrounds. Placing the information in a context relevant to the audience encouraged them to interact, participate, and extract the message of the program.

How attendees contributed to the knowledge sharing process was our third data indicator. This information assisted in conceptualizing how much attendees learned or how much of their knowledge was pre-existing. If responses were grounded in past experiences or previously attained knowledge we assessed that the audience was attempting to connect what they understood about the topic with the presenter's suggestions. Moreover, if the audience's comments were based primarily upon the information presented at the program, the audience member was exhibiting expansion of knowledge.

Results

Our three data indicators served as a guide for the conceptualization of four themes. These themes, which describe the commonalities that we identified in all of the programs, emerged during further analysis of the data collected from our observations. The four themes were: (a) Programs' functions were manifold, (b) program organization and presenter pedagogy influenced the climate, (c) programs encouraged active participation, and (d) audience knowledge was actively integrated into the program. It is important to note, that while the themes were supported by our data indicators, they were not confined by this framework. However, we specifically focused on how these themes fit into our data indicators.

Programs' Functions were Manifold

While we ascertained that the initial purpose of all programs was to share information and knowledge with the attendees, we determined that each program also served multiple purposes. These purposes were to disseminate new knowledge, to actively collaborate, and to highlight the interconnection between various cultures and backgrounds.

We believe these multiple functions were enhanced by hosting the programs at different campus locations; featuring presenters from various cultural and educational backgrounds, with or without affiliation to the University; and emphasizing cultural similarities and differences. Referencing González's framework, hosting programs at various locations exemplified the importance of the physical world, while it showcased presenters of various backgrounds highlighting the social world. The fact that the programs placed an emphasis on intercultural distinctions illustrated aspects of the epistemological world. The interplay of these three facets reinforced González's idea of how the physical, social, and epistemological worlds intersect to create an optimal opportunity for cultural nourishment. The overlapping of these theoretical worlds resurfaces throughout our results.

The programs, both implicitly and explicitly, highlighted the interconnections between various cultures and backgrounds. There were several instances where either the presenters or the attendees made references to similarities and connections between their culture and other cultures. For example, during the program on undocumented students, major discussion surrounded the hidden culture of fear inherent in these individual's lives that hinders them from seeking educational opportunities. The attendees, mostly Asian and Latina/o students, equally expressed their sentiments in validating an understanding of fear and how it has continually perpetuated within the individuals who migrate to this country every day. By providing the forum to exchange ideas, the presenters created an optimal environment for learning and the knowledge sharing process.

Program Organization and Presenter Pedagogy Influenced the Climate

Program organization and pedagogy was a theme that interlinked the attended programs. They collectively illustrated the methods of knowledge dissemination on a spectrum ranging from social to intellectual.

Presenters assumed that the audience members had an abundance of preexisting knowledge on the subject matter. These assumptions were expressed through usage of advanced language and references to concepts not included on handouts. In a program concentrated on Native American

culture, the presenter used the terms "Indian" and Navajo" interchangeably. For an attendee without previous knowledge of Native American culture, this could have been confusing. Thus, the presenter's perceptions that attendees would have preexisting knowledge on their subject areas may have influenced their chosen pedagogy. This may explain why various teaching methods overlapped across the majority of the programs.

Culturally specific language and media usage were also recurrent concepts among the presenters. Spanish terms and phrases such as "Día de la Raza," "Quinceañera" and "Chicano" were used at various programs. Distinctions were made of how these terms have slight differences in meaning among Latina/os from a variety of Spanish-speaking countries. Films, documentaries and web-based references were commonly used across the majority of the programs to emphasize the significance of the topic.

Programs Encouraged Active Participation

Each program topic was presented in a manner that held the attention of the attendees. Additionally, all programs followed a format that allowed participants4to immerse themselves in the topic and engage in meaningful discussion. We discerned that each of the programs attended encouraged the engagement of all participants, attributable to how the presenter influenced the organizational structure and tone of the program.

All programs were properly suited, both in topic and content, for a college-aged audience. This helped ensure that the heavily student-populated audience could relate to the presentation. During each program, the presenters shared knowledge with the audience members, often using familiar examples with which a wide array of people could identify, to ensure that the information was clearly understood. To add to the depth of the information and the reality of the topic, presenters strayed from imparting strictly intellectual knowledge by also sharing personal information. For example, in describing the dual identity experienced by Chicano people living near the Mexico-United States border, one presenter gave the personal example of craving pizza with jalapeños. Presenters also dealt with commonly held stereotypes of Latina/o people. Some made an active effort to refute these stereotypes—one program began with the presenter jokingly stating, "We're doing this on real time, not Latino time," to indicate that the program would run in a timely manner as opposed to having a late start. The timely beginning refuted the stereotype, while simultaneously acknowledging the stereotype's existence and assumed notoriety.

Program presenters were successful in engaging the audience members. Though not all programs evoked passionate discussion from the audience, there were multiple occasions where the audience members were visibly shocked by the information being presented. Audience members'

wide-eyed responses to a presenter's comment about a Catholic priest rejecting the Quinceañera ceremony due to the questionable integrity of the honoree's virginity, suggested that the audience was captivated. Though emotion was not always verbally expressed, occurrences such as this illustrated the attention level of audience members and the receipt of new knowledge. Regardless of the level of responsiveness from the audience during the program, most concluded with a well-informed dialogue that reflected the program topic. In addition to displaying preexisting knowledge of the topics, audience members took an active interest in the program. At the end of one program, an audience member asked the following series of questions: "Why did you choose to do this program? Was it your [personal] idea? Why? Where are you from? What is the significance [of this topic] to you?" The probing nature of these questions is indicative of high levels of engagement experienced by this program attendee.

Ending with a question and answer period, a standard portion of most programs, seemed an especially effective method of allowing the audience to make connections to the presentation and to share peer knowledge. As noted by Watson et al. (2002) identifying a connection to the campus community is important to student success. Through the dialogue that occurred during this portion of the program, a variety of viewpoints were disclosed, and participants' experience with the program topics was evidenced in references made to their personal lives and their preexisting knowledge base. Attendees prefaced their questions and comments, beginning with statements such as "That's similar to how I grew up," or referencing books and videos in their personal repertoires. The question and answer period became a knowledge sharing forum where participants bounced ideas and opinions off the commentary of others.

Audience Knowledge Was Actively Integrated Into the Program

Another major theme that arose in our study dealt directly with the program attendees. At each of the programs, the attendees' knowledge was actively integrated into the program.

Anytime attendees made a comment or asked a question based on their past experiences or preexisting knowledge, the presenter expounded upon this information for the benefit of other participants. By integrating this information into the program the presenters not only acknowledged the ability of attendees' input to strengthen the experiences of other participants, but also emphasized the idea that knowledge is present in all aspects of the campus community. This integration of knowledge was apparent when the presenters consciously broadened the epistemological environment. Both during and after programs, the presenters made an active effort to refrain from implying that their personal convictions were the absolute truth. They

did so by providing resources that attendees could use to formulate their own opinions. The provision of additional resources not only acted as a disclaimer, it also encouraged audience members to engage in personal research.

Summary

Cultural centers serve as learning environments. La Casa's programs served as demonstrations of this by offering participants what Kuh (2000) has outlined as the three synchronous practices of well-organized learning environments—opportunities, support, and rewards. Through programming, La Casa provides the campus community with opportunities to interact and discuss aspects of Latina/o culture in a knowledgeable environment. Often, the programs that we observed encouraged participants to engage in further research on a topic by providing program participants with handouts that detailed suggested readings and other information sources.

Our findings reflect existing literature in which cultural centers are proven to provide a safe social haven as well as a source for cultural nourishment. La Casa's programs provide Latina/o students with the opportunity to be in an environment that is centrally focused on their culture and features topics with which they readily identify. The programs also allow these students to see individuals who resemble them as scholars and leaders. As Hurtado and Carter (1997) noted, students who interact with faculty outside of the classroom express a greater sense of belonging and drive to excel. Personal interactions such as this often manifest as informal opportunities to participate in the knowledge sharing process. Other scholars have noted that social support serves to increase both students' self-esteem (Dubois, Nevhille, Parra & Pugh-Lilly, 2002) and the likelihood of their persistence at that institution (Stovall, 2000).

Program participants were rewarded with the acquisition of new knowledge, often having integrated their classroom knowledge with outside experiences. As González (2002) noted, exposure to new knowledge is a catalyst for students to seek further information on a topic and begin the process of becoming knowledge sharers themselves. The shift to knowledge sharer is encouraged through La Casa's multifunctional programming which acknowledges and accepts cultural distinctions and integrates program attendees' knowledge into the discussion.

Recommendations and Implications for Practice

We found that program presenters appeared to have prior experience in presenting to, and facilitating epistemological discussion among, collegiate level students; however, they did not appear to invest the same amount of effort in preparing for their presentations. Some presenters came with a sufficient amount of material ready to discuss, while others seemed to rely heavily on their visual aids and other props. While we understand that it might be difficult to determine if all presenters are comparably credentialed, there should be some minimum level of expectancy for presentation and facilitation skills. Also, it is important to note that prior experience alone does not equate to adequate presentation skills for collegiate programs.

More undergraduate students should be incorporated as presenters. Multiple undergraduate groups either supported or co-sponsored the programs we observed. Students from these groups usually offered opening remarks and introduced the presenters; they were seldom presenters themselves. González (2002) notes that knowledge learned and internalized on campus often allows students to share that knowledge with others. This process of assuming the role of knowledge sharer contributes to the students' "sense of purpose [and drive] to persist at the university" (p. 213). La Casa and other cultural centers are strongly encouraged to feature undergraduate presenters, thus increasing knowledge sharing on the peer level and building students' confidence as knowledge sharers.

Other services offered by La Casa may create nets of support for students, but this subsystem was not evident in the programming efforts we studied. It seems logical that reference should be made to the services offered by the Center as it is possible that program attendees may have never had previous contact with La Casa. An extension of González's (2002) work suggests that providing this information may assist university students by providing "an impetus for discovering other… forms of cultural nourishment" (p. 213). Through this research we can move past noting the view of cultural centers as simply fostering support for students of various ethnic or cultural backgrounds, to studying how this support structure actually functions.

Limitations and Avenues for Future Research

Though this report focused strictly on the epistemological aspect of campus cultural centers, it is important to remember that the social and physical worlds are interconnected with the knowledge that exists and is exchanged on campus. The location of La Casa on IUB's campus, with respect to the central aspects of campus life, may influence the way that campus constituents interpret the institution's perception and value of Latina/o culture. This represents the physical layout of the campus, and the social construction of the campus climate. Though no direct observations were made regarding audience demographics, it is possible that La Casa's programs served as a social outlet for students of various ethnic and educational backgrounds. Future research in this area could aid the body of knowledge

on campus cultural centers and campus programming, helping to situate these areas within Gonzalez's three worlds.

By constructing our study around current literature, we were able to remove our personal biases from the framework. Our study was, however, limited by the fact that we had no frame of reference regarding presenter or topic selection, and that the constraints of our study only afforded enough time to attend a select number of events. Future researchers would do well to consider these issues and to construct methods that eliminate these restrictions. While we understand the limitations presented here, we do not believe that they significantly detract from our findings, subsequent recommendations, or their practical applications.

Identifying and creating campus sources of cultural nourishment are important to current practices in higher education. Working in a field focused on the holistic development of each student, practitioners should be concerned with how well individual students are able to integrate into the campus. Students who frequent events at a campus cultural center are likely to also identify with underrepresented populations. By focusing on La Casa, this study was designed to capture the experiences of these students. As members of an underrepresented population, these students may find it difficult to make meaningful connections to the campus, thus impeding their ability to persist. Ensuring that the campus provides a culturally nourishing environment may be the best way to assist these students in their pursuit of higher education.

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Nathan Cheesman graduated from the Higher Education and Student Affairs program in 2008. He received a B.S in Integrated Mathematics Education and a B.A. in Mathematics & Statistics from Miami University in 2006. At IUB, Nathan served as Graduate Live-In Advisor for Lambda Chi Alpha Fraternity and was an intern for the Student Development and Compliance Office in the Intercollegiate Athletics Department.

Isaac Kinsey graduated from the Higher Education and Student Affairs master's program in 2008. He received a B.S. in Kinesiology from Indiana University in 2005. While at IUB, Isaac worked as a Graduate Assistant/Assistant Instructor of the R100 Leadership Development Series at the Center for Student Leadership Development and also as the Graduate Live-In Advisor for the Sigma Alpha Mu Fraternity.

Israel Laguer is a 2007 graduate of Indiana University's Higher Education and Student Affairs Master's program. As a graduate of The Rowan University, Israel earned his B.A. in Sociology with a Concentration in Leadership Studies. At IUB, he worked with Residential Programs and Services and taught courses focused on the leadership development of students and the analysis of historically Black Greek Lettered Organizations.

Mahauganee Dawn Shaw is a doctoral student in the Higher Education and Student Affairs program. She earned a M.A. in Educational Administration and a B.A. in Liberal Arts both from the University of Missouri-Kansas City. At IUB, Mahauganee currently serves as a Project Associate at the Center for Postsecondary Research.

Faculty Governance: Challenging the Myths

Kelly A. Kish, Lauren E. Morrill-Ragusea,

and Robin L. Murphey

This study examined the role of faculty in university governance using archival records of the Bloomington Faculty Council at Indiana University Bloomington. The study employed archival analysis techniques to challenge one myth about faculty governance. As faculty members continually seek to carve out their roles in institutional decision making it is increasingly important to ground their arguments in historical evidence.

Overview

The study of institutional governance has gained increased momentum in recent years due in part to heightened external pressures influencing American colleges and universities (Tierney, 2004). As Burgan (2004) outlined, these outside pressures include declining support from state budgets, increased activism on the part of boards and alumni, new demands by nontraditional students, increased foci on the role of institutions in the economic development of surrounding regions, and competition from for-profit higher education—all of which have challenged the structure and participants in university governance and decision making (Burgan). These discussions raised an underlying, and unanswered, question about the role of faculty in university governance in the 21st century. This study examined the role of faculty in university governance by examining myths about faculty governance that are referenced in higher education scholarship and commonly heard in administrative offices and trustees' meetings around the country. Using the lens of one faculty senate organization we challenged the myth that faculty senates are given menial tasks by the administration and have no influence over significant decisions.

Faculty in Institutional Governance

Over recent decades, competing and conflicting definitions have emerged over the appropriate role for faculty in governance. In an era of higher education shifting toward market models of organization and governing boards applying bureaucratic decision making models to areas that used to be within the domain of the faculty, the 1966 Statement on Government of Colleges and Universities issued by the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) has lost its meaning in (AAUP, 1966; Helms and Price, 2005). The Statement afforded faculty "primary responsibility for such fundamental areas as curriculum, subject matter and methods of