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Tradition with a Capital "T": The Value of Campus Traditions

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Abstract

Tradition with a Capital "T" explores the value of campus traditions in higher education. Literature regarding tradition and campus traditions answers the question "what is tradition?" and investigates the role of tradition in higher education. Original research sought to survey student, personnel, and general perceptions of the value of campus traditions in higher education through a qualitative, phenomenological approach focused on a single campus tradition. In order to obtain a holistic perspective, the researcher conducted a review of archival resources and interviews with students, faculty, staff, and administrators connected to the campus tradition. Three themes surfaced from the archival research regarding this campus tradition: change, growth, and criticism. Five themes emerged from the interviews regarding the value of this tradition, and campus traditions in general: community, bonding, unity, connections, and identity. Based on these findings, several implications for practice and research also surface for higher education practitioners. This research confirmed the value of campus traditions and identified their specific value in higher education.

Introduction

The room is dark until spotlights shine on two people on a stage who share a few lines to introduce their group. The lights begin to dim again. Soon, voices start to sing, lights come up, and music begins. Bright colored costumes, perfectly synchronized choreography, and medleys of clever parodies to popular songs cross the stage and fill the room. The students continue in song and dance for several minutes with broad smiles across their faces. This energetic and fun experience is Step Sing, a campus tradition at Samford University in Birmingham, Alabama (Sigma Chi “Alley Cats” Step Sing 2015 Sweepstakes Winner, n.d.).

Campus traditions exist throughout higher education, on virtually every college or university campus. Bronner (2012) argues, “The idea of tradition on campus refers inevitably to connection—to the past, to people, to place . . .” (p. xiii). These connections are significant as they allow students to come together and “feel a part of something larger than themselves” (Bronner, 2012, p. xiii).

While many campus traditions center on athletics, others focus on academics, Greek societies, or student clubs. Regardless of their affiliation, campus traditions are an essential aspect of the campus environment and folklore (Bronner, 2012). In particular, campus traditions reflect the campus culture, which is impacted by a variety of factors, including the surrounding community and region.

Higher education professionals must ensure institutional traditions provide positive and meaningful experiences for students. These professionals play a key role in upholding the community built through campus traditions by preserving these valuable traditions (Strange & Banning, 2001). Campus traditions not only contribute to campus community and culture, but “a large part of American culture involves college tradition” (Bronner, 2012, p. 6). Such traditions, often parts of statewide and national societies, carry great significance and value.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of the study was to understand the value of campus traditions in higher education. In particular, the study explored the campus tradition known as Step Sing at Samford University. The study analyzed student and personnel perceptions of the value of campus traditions and was guided by the following research questions:

1. What is the student perception of the value of campus traditions?
2. What is the personnel perception of the value of campus traditions?

3. What is the value of campus traditions?

Literature Review

What is Tradition?

One can spell tradition with a capital "T" due to its significance and importance in culture and life (Fearn-Banks, 2002). Many individuals believe traditions are not just repeated events, but also serve as connections from the present era to generations past (Bruns, 1991). The word tradition is from the Latin meaning "something handed over" (Graburn, 2001, p. 6). Even today, "tradition [is] the name given to those cultural features which, in situations of changes, were to be continued to be handed on, thought about, preserved and not lost" (Graburn, 2001, p. 6).

Especially when spelled with a capital "T," tradition can prove meaningful to individuals and entire people groups. For many, traditions are "almost equivalent to inheritance," as they are passed on from one individual, group, or generation to the next (Graburn, 2001, p. 6). Traditions carry weight and significance as they give "both identity and status" (Graburn, 2001, p. 7). The existence and importance of traditions provide "a strength to draw upon, a source of historically defined identity, and a source of a sense of safety, specialness, or difference" (Graburn, 2001, p. 9).

Tradition in Higher Education

While always unique, campus traditions were not always the large community gatherings often thought of today. In fact, Frederick Rudolph (1962) notes campus traditions first came about in the 1840s among a select few Greek letter organizations. By the early 1900s, campus wide traditions for all students outside of Greek organizations began to emerge, especially athletic traditions. Students would wear school colors, support their team mascot, and sing fight songs and alma maters at sporting events (Thelin, 2004). Other more inclusive campus traditions, specifically focused on generating institutional loyalty and unity among students, also continued to develop (Van Jura, 2010).

The culture of a university is an important and unifying part of the student experience. Higher education culture is unique and comes in many different forms, all of which impact students. Kuh and Whitt (1988) define culture accordingly:

Culture in higher education is defined as the collective and mutually shaping patterns of norms, values, practices, beliefs, and

assumptions that guide the behavior of individuals and groups in an institution, providing a frame of references for interpreting the mean of events and actions on and off campus. (p. 162)

Campus culture is a significant part of the college years and serves many purposes during a student's experience. In particular, Kuh and Whitt identified four such purposes:

(1) it conveys a sense of identity; (2) it facilitates commitment to an entity, such as the college or peer group, other than self; (3) it enhances the stability of a group's social system; and (4) it is a sense-making device that guides and shapes behavior. (p. 161)

Campus traditions are thus deeply rooted in campus culture and, therefore, accomplish many of the same meaningful purposes.

The idea that culture is reflected in traditions applies to individuals, groups, generations, and even organizations throughout society (Komives & Voodard, 2003). Like any other area of society, the culture of a higher education institution influences the traditions on campus. While some campus traditions are official and others unofficial, all traditions are significant to the campus environment (40 tremendous college traditions, 2014).

As a result, campus traditions not only prove valuable for students, but also the campus community as a whole. Kuh and Whitt (1988) clarify, "Because culture is bound to a context, every institution's culture is different" (p. 162). Institutions' unique cultures often draw students in and make the colleges or universities special to their communities. Many campus traditions further this significance by incorporating "members in a common purpose" (Komives and Voodard, 2003, p. 39). Campus traditions create opportunities for the entire community to come together, even at large institutions where this possibility seems unlikely (Komives and Voodard, 2003).

Over time, established practices become official tradition and are repeated simply because they always have been (Horowitz, 2013; Birnbaum, 1988). Administrators, faculty, staff, and students are expected to know traditions of the institution and continue them for years to come (Komive & Voodard, 2003). In fact, many institutions associate orientation and new student programs with the role of educating new students about campus traditions and affirming the importance of those traditions (Boyer, 1987; Komives & Voodard, 2003).

Methodology

Context

Samford University, the focus of this study, has a unique song and dance tradition that celebrated its 64th anniversary in 2015 (Flynt, 2001). This tradition, known as Step Sing, has almost 1,000 student participants each year (Traditions, n.d.). With an undergraduate student body of just over 3,000 students, nearly one-third of Samford students participate in Step Sing annually (College Search-Samford University, n.d.).

Each year, at least three Step Sing shows are performed for sold-out audiences. Current students, prospective students, employees, alumni, and members of the Birmingham community attend the shows (Step Sing 2015, n.d.). All of the proceeds from the ticket sales are used for philanthropic purposes (Traditions, n.d.).

Step Sing is coordinated under the Division of Student Affairs and is directed by students in various capacities (Step Sing 2015, n.d.). Each year, Step Sing “is developed, written, choreographed, rehearsed and performed by students” (Traditions, n.d., para. 6). Additionally, Step Sing is an “educational activity in which students participate through leadership development, organizational administration, and time management” (Step Sing 2015, n.d., para. 2).

Like other campus traditions, Step Sing is “socially connective and culturally rooted” (Bronner, 2012, p. 5). Step Sing compels students to perform, or to support their peers, and thus furthers culture within the campus and surrounding community. For over sixty years, with thousands of students involved, Step Sing has become one of the most significant campus traditions at Samford University (Flynt, 2001; Traditions, n.d.).

Approach and Design

The study examined the topic of campus traditions and their value through phenomenological research, which seeks to understand individuals’ experiences pertaining to a specific phenomenon (Anderson & Spencer, 2002). One specific campus tradition was chosen and students and personnel involved with or who experienced this tradition were interviewed. These interviews, along with archival research, served as the data for the study and assisted in generating a “description of the experiences about the phenomenon that all individuals have in common” (Creswell, 2013, p. 122). The research portrayed “the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences,” specifically regarding the chosen campus tradition (Creswell, 2013, p. 76).

Participants

Students, faculty, staff, and administrators have perceptions of the value of campus traditions. Therefore, the study sought to include participants with a variety of connections to the tradition. The research included an equal amount of student and personnel perspectives (ten students and alumni as well as 10 faculty, staff, and administrators) in order to gain a more holistic and comprehensive understanding of the value of campus traditions for the campus and surrounding community.

Instruments

A set of interview questions was created to assess the value of the campus tradition from the perspective of both students and personnel. These questions were developed after a review of the literature identified current trends and areas of interest. Two questions asked of all participants were, “What is Step Sing’s enduring value?” and “If Step Sing were to cease to take place, what void, if any, would it leave in the Samford community or in Samford’s fabric of traditions?”

Analysis

Archival research helped the researcher understand the historical context of the campus tradition. Together, interviews and archival research informed the researcher’s wider perspective of the value of the campus tradition within the campus culture. The recordings of interviews were transcribed and then coded for themes. These themes illustrated “what all participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon” (Creswell, 2013, p. 76). These commonalities were essential in drawing conclusions from this qualitative, phenomenological study.

Results

Introduction

Tradition, especially in higher education, is passed on from one generation or group to the next (Graburn, 2001). This pattern of transmission creates both a historical and present context for tradition in higher education. Thus, the current study sought to explore both contexts. Archival research revealed aspects of the historical context while interviews described characteristics of the present context.

Archival research was conducted through a document review at Samford University, where the interviews also took place. This exploration of the archives included an analysis of memorandums, letters, procedures

and regulations, newspaper articles, yearbook pictures, programs, and posters from throughout the history of Step Sing. This research revealed the historical context of Step Sing, an event with over fifty years of history.

Interview research was then conducted amongst students, faculty, staff, administrators, and alumni of Samford. These interviews asked questions to understand the value of Step Sing from the perspective of various individuals in the Samford community. The research revealed the present context and value of this beloved campus tradition.

Archival Findings

Documents related to Step Sing date back to the tradition's origins in the 1950s ([Step Sing leadership]). Initially, this archival review revealed how much the campus tradition developed in over fifty years of existence. Moreover, the number of documents collected demonstrates the role of this tradition at Samford. In particular, these documents contributed to an understanding of the value of Step Sing as a campus tradition at Samford University in its change, growth, and criticism over the years.

Change. Ironically, the Step Sing tradition has a history longer than the name of the institution—Samford University. In fact, Samford was still known as Howard College for over ten years after the first Step Sing ([Miss Reba Sloan]). When the institution's name changed, so did many procedures and regulations of the tradition. The categories Step Sing groups entered, time limit, song requirements, instrumentalist use, judging criteria, and—of course—ticket prices encountered numerous changes over the years ([Regulations & Procedures]). The longevity of this tradition is most apparent in a review of Step Sing programs, dating back to 1965. These programs were originally black and white paper copies of hand-drawn designs ([“Sound of Music”]). Now, these programs are professionally printed, full-color booklets with numerous photographs of current participants ([Step Sing]).

Growth. Publicity for Step Sing dates back to 1951 according to the campus newspaper, the Howard Crimson ([Campus step-sing Tuesday at 7 p.m.]). This publicity continued for years to come and began to establish this event as a campus tradition as early as 1952. That year, it claimed, “all campus sings [will] resume . . .” as if this was an expected tradition ([All-campus sings resume Tuesday]). Attention to this event was especially important in relation to the on-campus dancing policy at Samford. At many institutions, especially historically Baptist institutions like Samford, dancing was disputed. Yet, in 1988, dancing was officially

sanctioned at Samford (Easterling, 1988). As a result, the publicity and excitement for Step Sing only continued to grow.

Criticism. The final archival theme highlighted is not due to its frequency, but its importance in the context of campus traditions. Step Sing, like almost any other campus tradition, experienced its fair share of criticism. Some disapproval resulted from the dancing dispute, while other forms of ridicule stemmed from the tradition itself. In 2000, the campus newspaper, the Samford Crimson, published an article entitled “Lose Step Sing, find some real collegiate tradition” (Holmes, 2000). While this example is extreme in nature, it demonstrates the pushback this tradition, like many other traditions in higher education, receive.

Interview Findings. As previously noted, students, faculty, staff, administrators, and alumni of Samford University were interviewed in relation to Step Sing. A total of twenty interviews were conducted—ten specifically with students and alumni and ten with faculty, staff, and administrators. All of the participants were in some way connected to the Step Sing tradition, ranging from being as involved as the coordinator for the event to just being a one-time spectator. Five themes emerged from interviews to describe the value of Step Sing and of campus traditions in higher education: community, bonding, unity, connections, and identity.

Community. Participants believed the value of Step Sing is found in the community it creates. The broad reach of this tradition even extends to the surrounding Birmingham community, from which many audience members come. A Samford alumni and staff member experienced this community engagement as a former Step Sing participant, saying, “This was my tradition. My part of adding to the Samford community.”

Bonding. Interview participants also saw value in Step Sing through the bonding that occurred during the experience. Each Step Sing act involves at least forty students, creating opportunities for new relationships to form within the acts. Additionally, during the performances, members of different acts often interact and support one another, creating bonds between all participants. Another Samford alumni offered, “I would say there is definitely kind of a family bonding experience that goes on within the groups [involved].”

Unity. Interview participants also saw value in the unity Step Sing creates at Samford. Participants span from Greek organizations, independent groups, and even campus ministries, contributing to the unity that is experienced. One campus administrator claimed, “Step Sing is our most significant unifying event for students and alums.” The administrator

even referenced how more alumni often return to Samford for Step Sing than for Homecoming each year.

Connections. Interview participants also believed in the valuable connections made through Step Sing. In addition to former students making their way back to Samford for this event, a prospective student visit is also hosted on campus. Many of these students see the show and factor the experience into their choice to come to Samford. Moreover, many students' parents visit during this weekend and feel more connected to the institution as a result. A faculty member acknowledged these connections on campus, explaining the value of Step Sing exists in "community and group involvement, getting students to be involved in the tradition. And keeping that tradition alive. And bringing back alumni—another way of connecting students to alumni and alumni back to their alma mater."

Identity. Interview participants recognize the value Step Sing carries in creating Samford's institutional identity. Part of the institution for many years, Step Sing persisted as a critical campus tradition through waves of change and is truly a part of the culture and identity of Samford. One Samford alumni and staff member recognized the value of Step Sing within their own undergraduate experience and current work, saying, "Everything else has just come and gone throughout the years. Step Sing has been the one consistent thing. So yeah, Samford would not be Samford without Step Sing for sure."

Discussion

Implications for Practice

In light of these research findings regarding the value of campus tradition, a number of implications for practice among higher education professionals emerge. To begin, practitioners should promote beneficial campus traditions. Campus traditions like Step Sing involve a great deal of the community, generate positive results, and are generally well-received, making them worthy of institutional encouragement. The promotion of these traditions can come in the form of verbal support, finances, or provision of other resources to uphold the tradition. Institutional support for campus traditions not only demonstrates buy-in, but also belief in the value the tradition carries.

Additionally, many campus traditions continue each year simply because they are rituals their respective institutions "have always done." Higher education professionals should ensure these traditions are

prioritized not simply for the sake of rote habit, but because of their value and significance. Identifying the value and importance of traditions provides more opportunities for support, ensuring their enduring futures. When the value of these traditions is not identified, traditions may lose their value or larger purpose within the campus community.

Moreover, communicating the value of campus traditions should become a priority. Rather than just stating traditions have value, practitioners should pinpoint the value and communicate it to the institutional community. Identifying specific value encourages practitioners in the importance and significance of the work they do promoting campus traditions. Furthermore, when students, faculty, staff, administrators, and alumni understand the value, purpose, and significance of a tradition, they are more likely to take part in and encourage it. Informing others of the value of traditions creates more support to rally around and further traditions for years to come.

Finally, if certain campus traditions become detrimental, higher education professionals must respond. Detrimental campus traditions are harmful to students, create barriers rather than unity, encourage negative habits, and leave the community in a worse state than before the tradition occurred. Campus traditions posing such challenges must be eliminated or reinvented to carry value at their college or university. Moreover, eliminating or reinventing traditions needs to be clearly communicated to the campus community. Higher education professionals should explain why the tradition is detrimental in its current state and how they intend to remove or improve the tradition.

Implications for Research

As a result of these findings, multiple implications for future research also surface. Further research could explore ways to alter existing traditions to enhance their value and strive toward achieving the identified themes. Research could identify one or more existing campus traditions in higher education and utilize strategies to enhance the community, bonding, unity, connections, and identity associated with the tradition.

Moreover, future research should continue exploring beneficial campus traditions—as well as harmful campus traditions—identifying how to clearly distinguish between the two. Traditions are generally identified as beneficial because of the value they carry or harmful due to the value they lack. However, because all students are different, a campus

tradition benefitting one student may cause harm to another. Therefore, further research could continue to investigate how to promote valuable traditions and eliminate or reinvent harmful traditions.

Limitations

While the study identifies the value of campus traditions in higher education, it also comes with limitations. First, the breadth of the study was relatively small. Just as all colleges and universities are unique, so are their campus traditions. While most of the identified themes of the value of campus traditions could prove applicable to the traditions of other institutions, the current research was limited in scope. As a result, efforts to extend the research need to also factor in the unique qualities of each campus and the individuals represented.

Second, the student involvement in the Step Sing tradition is relatively incomparable because it involves one-third of the undergraduate student population. With such vast involvement, every person in the Samford community knows the Step Sing tradition. In fact, very few would likely offer anything negative, or would likely offer such remarks hesitantly, in regards to Step Sing. Lastly, the sheer size of this tradition possibly generated bias in the interviews due to the tradition's powerful and commanding presence on campus.

Conclusion

Research at Samford University regarding Step Sing revealed the value of this campus tradition. Students, faculty, staff, administrators, and alumni alike understand this tradition's long-standing history, powerful presence, and enduring future due to its value. The value of Step Sing, and many other campus traditions, rests in community, bonding, unity, connections, and identity.

Simon Bronner, a professor of American studies and folklore at Pennsylvania State University-Harrisburg and author of *Campus Traditions: Folklore From the Old-Time College to the Modern Mega-University*, believes whole-heartedly in the value of campus traditions in the lives of students. In particular, Bronner claims, "With very few ways of acknowledging adulthood in American society, campus traditions serve as important coming-of-age events" (Schmalz, 2015, para. 1). Higher education practitioners must see these events as significant and begin to understand the value of campus traditions. Samford University's Step Sing campus tradition, in many ways, provides a unique window into the nature of that value.

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