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Budget crisis: UNR student interest group

WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?

The Nevada System of Higher Education will cut 14 percent – and possibly an additional 11 percent on top of that – from its budget in the next fiscal year due to a lack of revenue from tourist-related taxes in Nevada. Since the start of 2008, the U.S. economy has entered a fluctuating recession deeply affecting states all over the country. State and private university funding has been zapped by states' depleting revenue. According to a financial analysis done by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities; Rockefeller Institute and reported by *The New York Times*, “at least 37 states and the District of Columbia have faced or are facing budget gaps totaling \$66 billion” because “most states rely on sales, income and property taxes, which are seeing a significant drop in such revenues”(1). Nevada's gap reaches \$1.5 billion, putting more than state education at risk.

The University of Nevada, Reno is currently slated to lose \$31 million from its budget. The university is currently “trimming the fat” from various departments, such as the German-language department, the “free” in the tutoring center, the career development center, equestrian major and more (2). These departments are important to many students but Governor Jim Gibbons insists education be cut to make up for the state's increasing budget shortfall.

For this interest group, I hope to tackle the budget crisis at the University of Nevada, Reno from the perspective of students. The faculty already has their interests covered by the administration but it seems no one is representing students on the ground level. In order to identify the affected group, one must think of John Dewey's concept of publics (3): people interrelated by common interest, common political goals, common influence and often relative geographic similarities. The purpose of this interest group strategy will be to narrow the broad scope of UNR students to a more manageable size or at the least be able to divide them into manageable categories. This will help identify goals, relevant interests and influences.

WHAT IS THE GROUP'S COMMON INTEREST?

The budget crisis appears to affect students unevenly as small majors are cut, such as the equestrian major, and the tutoring center and marching band no longer receive funds from the school. UNR students are disjointed; while band students and some sports fans hold high stakes in the success of the marching band, others want to sacrifice the band for the good of academics. Many students don't know anything about the budget problems while others are in the path of destruction. The few students in the equestrian major lost their horses while more than 99 percent of the student population didn't know the university offered an equestrian major or owned horses.

Despite these fragmented interests, all students have a stake in the price of their education and the value of their degree. Chancellor Rogers' newest recommendation to alleviate the budget stress is to raise tuition by 25 percent, which will cost \$816 per student per 12 credits (3). Every undergraduate student at UNR is affected by changes in

tuition price. The degree in which they are affected will vary, but tuition prices are an issue students can rally around. Furthermore, as the school loses money and departments, it can lose students, or worse, its prestige and reputation. Employers may look at a diploma from Nevada and consider it less valuable than an equal degree from another state. This restricts students' abilities to gain out-of-state employment and remain competitive in varying industries. All students want their diploma to represent competitive worth in their respective industries in order to start or move forward in a career.

WHAT ARE THEIR POLITICAL RESOURCES?

The student government (Associated Students of the University of Nevada) represents the most student-driven political resource for students on campus. There is large debate among students, ASUN officials and faculty about whether or not ASUN actually accomplishes anything. ASUN, more than anything else, represents students regardless of the effectiveness of their "policies." ASUN President Eli Reilly, for example, attends Board of Regents meetings and speaks on behalf of students who approach or write him. The senators of ASUN also created a committee to study the budget crisis' affects on student life. But beyond representation, ASUN has little to no political power or ability to make and enforce policy outside of the Joe Crowley Student Union.

Conversely, students have access to university officials and administrators, the Board of Regents, Chancellor Rogers, legislators, Governor Jim Gibbons and Senators Harry Reid and John Ensign. Any one of these political actors represents students' interests in conjunction with faculty and a myriad of other people. Jim Gibbons and the legislators

also represent the state, which stands in opposition to students' needs as the state budget must be balanced despite NSHE's needs. Nonetheless, students may write letters and legislation as well as show up to town hall meetings to represent themselves. Students can engage politically by voting for initiatives and writing letters and civically by starting their own conversation about the problem. In the end though, their efforts must result in political activism.

Students also have a great deal of media geared toward them. The budget cuts are generally seen as negative and students are the victims; therefore, news outlets cover the budget crisis with students in the peripheral. The Nevada Sagebrush, the student paper on UNR's campus, also covers the budget crisis from a student perspective though their lack of knowledge – with other news sources – stunts their ability to analyze the problem and offer effective solutions. Nonetheless, attention garnered by news outlets provides valuable leverage students could use to open civic conversations to a wider base, attract professional help and solicit analysis and solutions. They could do this by writing letters based on their own research, lobbying the news to provide research, important sources and offer solutions to be analyzed.

WHAT ARE THEIR POLITICAL WEAKNESSES AS A GROUP?

Though the elite say they want to hear from students, there's little students' letters to Gov. Gibbons and surface-level political participation can do other than reinforce the idea that budget cuts are bad. Without creative solutions or massive participation and compromise, the legislators will do what's best for the state and colleges more generally. In this case, students at UNR will have little to no say over specific changes and reforms.

This is not necessarily bad as the majority will be represented, guaranteeing a high level of equity.

Moreover, students are generally unmotivated and apathetic toward university policy and happenings. Many students are more interested in their social lives and futures than in problems facing the university as a whole. Students rely on other people to help them through policy troubles – the free-rider problem – because they don't know what or how to do or don't want to do anything. Also, many students cannot identify what affects them; they make false correlations between the budget and their personal observations. When afflicted by a complex issue that's hard to solve, some students spend a lot of time informing themselves while others resist information: "If I can't see it, it doesn't exist." This causes large disparities between informed and uninformed students, preventing the conversation from progressing significantly. Also, the constant changes in the budget crisis make it hard for any student to keep up in a useful way unless he/she follows developments daily.

WHY ARE THEY NOT PARTICIPATING AT THEIR FULL POTENTIAL TODAY?

Informed students do not know what to do with their information. So they know their university is doomed to lose more than \$31 million, but what can a student do about it? The situation feels inevitable so what good will writing letters and showing up do? Eli Reilly similarly did not speak during a Board of Regents' meeting in Las Vegas because he felt all the other students before him said the same thing. Does one really need to write letters and show up to meetings to prove that losing \$31 million is a bad thing? The problem here comes from apparent lack of efficacy. Uninformed students don't even

know what's happening; when tuition goes up and their major disappears, some won't know why. Some majors and classes have been cancelled due to lack of enrollment, not because of the budget problem. Students unfamiliar with all the aspects of the budget likely cannot tell the difference between regular class cuts and budget-related class cuts. This misinformation disenchanting informed students and officials and confuses uninformed students, compounding the problem further.

A second, larger reason for lack of participation stems from the hugely fragmented nature of a university community. In a regular community, such as Spanish Springs or Galena, citizens share common geography, socioeconomic status, transportation needs, political and social needs and often share similar values. Some fragmentation exists but these differences are often smaller and identified through demographics. Also, small niche communities can form ad hoc coalitions to equally represent fragmented members.

University students, on the other hand, represent an extremely varied community. Students create, destroy and recreate publics every day, like atoms in a fusion reactor. Their social networks exist inside classrooms and disappear at the end of a period. Their social networks are spread across the country between new college colleagues and old high school or hometown friends and family. Students' geographic communities change depending on what part of campus they visit each semester, what house or apartments they move to and where they grew up. Medical students, for example, will have completely different social networks than engineering students or journalism students because they never spend time with each other. Also, many students' interests change depending upon their majors, newly forming political or social ideals or participation in clubs and organizations. Therefore, students rarely belong to a stable community or

interest group and those who do, find themselves in transient social networks that surround small, temporary issues or large political perspectives. Simply put, most students' lives are spread across unequal aspects of politics without enough interest in one particular issue or idea. In this state of confusion, it's difficult to unite a committed group of students for any given time toward any particular goal.

WHAT IS YOUR STRATEGY? WHAT WOULD HAPPEN IF THEY WERE ABLE TO PARTICIPATE MORE ACTIVELY IN THE POLICY PROCESS?

The point of the interest group is to prevent tyranny of the minority. In the budget crisis those who are affected feel intense pain, such as the marching band, foreign language students, equestrian and medical majors, while others don't see it at all. When the minority tries to affect change, the balance of interest is thrown off, causing misrepresented priorities. This interest group should include a more general cross section of students who can help sway policy. The main purpose of the interest group is to help administrators and legislators set priorities for redrafting the budget by creating a cohesive opinion of unified sets of publics.

Right now, the Facebook group "The Nevada Higher Education Budget Cuts are threatening my future" is gathering students (about 1,400) around information: news articles, letters from Chancellor Rogers and policy reform. This group networks normally unconnected students from across NSHE and centers them around a single conversation, creating a new, larger public out of hundreds of smaller ones. However, the group stops at a conversation among students and with the few administrators and journalists in the group. Most of the members discuss problems they face or observe and updates in the news. They are by no means mobilized or participatory outside of the Web.

This interest group, then, must use momentum from the Facebook group, and various other ad hoc social networks, to make a larger cohesive public. Then it must mobilize. The interest group must meet in person and hold a forum for its members. They should break into smaller groups in order to understand each other's perspectives and answer these questions: What is a valuable education? What is necessary to attain that education at a Nevada university? What is not necessary to attain that education at a Nevada university? Each small group should come to a consensus within, then present their ideas to the rest of the group. Then the entire membership should come to a consensus in order to build a criterion for the remainder of the conversation. Finally, this written criterion for a valuable education must be sent to the appropriate administrators. From here out, the criterion must be the premise for all further conversations.

At this point, the interest group can partner with ASUN's budget crisis committee to examine the budget specifically from the criteria. Working together with other administrators and officials, the interest group can lobby for or against new initiatives and changes in the budget crisis, such as the possible tuition increase or the new additional percentage cut(s). The interest group should also spend time with the press as mentioned above, informing other students, holding letter to the editor writing parties and generally communicating with each other and politicians. If the interest group reaches outside the university community or the Nevada community, they might find ways to improve NSHE's situation from experienced states, businesses or universities. The interest group can work closer with the intermountain west states – Nevada, Utah, Colorado, New Mexico and Arizona – to find solutions and pool resources. The interest group should represent a motivating force for students, a way to connect people, give a face to the

budget crisis and work with politicians to accomplish goals and act as a cohesive unit, not a unit in opposition. The conversation has already been started by Chancellor Rogers, his staff and supporters: Autism Coalition of Nevada, St. Rose Dominican Hospitals, Coldwell Banker Q-Team Realty, Southern Nevada Water Authority, Barrick Gold Corporation and several more Nevada businesses (5, 6).

Many people currently suggest protesting the budget cuts by picketing in front of Gov. Gibbon's mansion. This is not an advisable or useful idea. The budget cuts will happen regardless of any protest action. Though Gov. Gibbons is unwilling to invent his own budget reform, he is not so far opposed to others' innovations and creative thinking. Protesting the budget cuts does nothing at all because the budget cuts are an answer to fiscal failure not new fiscal policy or reform. Instead, students and people need to prioritize. The interest group must be a vessel and a platform for cooperative compromise, not virulent opposition.

WHY WOULD THIS STRATEGY WORK FOR YOUR GROUP?

Students need a cohesive structure where they can represent themselves accurately. The group is not meant to find like-minded people but to unify students for a single goal: save their university experience in the most efficient way possible. Because students don't know how to participate alone, they need a cohesive structure with a leader. More than a leader, they need to feel as if they are moving the system forward. Working with administrators and officials will provide that sense of efficacy and cooperation from seeing politics in action.

Lobbying also allows more committed students to stay heavily involved while others show support through membership numbers, signatures and letters. Committed, more informed students can coordinate with politicians and lawyers, write initiatives or legislation, communicate with other schools, recruit or research with the knowledge of support from more than 1,500 other students. This structure purposely creates the free-rider problem and uses it as an advantage.

WHAT PITFALLS MIGHT YOU FIND DIFFICULT TO OVERCOME?

Because students are transient, their interests or lack of interests constantly shift. This group could end up like any number of clubs or organizations: dead and full of uninterested, non-participating students who no longer care. Keeping students committed over artificial timelines – semesters broken up by a month or three months – is difficult. Students who care about the budget crisis in November or December might not remember it by January or February when the legislators meet. The timeline is also problematic because of the small space between now and the end of February. When the legislative sessions ends, all decisions will be made final; therefore, the group must mobilize quickly and effectively over the winter break to be successful. Further change can be made by the Board of Regents but the Board of Regents are frozen inside the legislators' box. If the free-rider advantage backfires, no leadership structure will emerge or move the group and students' interests forward.

Also, administrators could ignore the call from students or the legislators and Gov. Gibbons could completely override any progress they make. Though local administrators want to know what students think, legislators and the governor are interested only in

fiscal solvency. One cannot bank the movement of a group on part-time legislators who are not easily held accountable for any damage they do. If the legislators balanced the budget ignoring input from the interest group this would disenchant students, the primary beneficiaries of their decision and destroy everything they attempted to accomplish.

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