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

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TRADITION WITH A CAPITAL “T”:

THE VALUE OF CAMPUS

TRADITIONS

A thesis

Presented to

The School of Social Sciences, Education & Business

Department of Higher Education and Student Development

Taylor University

Upland, Indiana

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Higher Education and Student Development

by

Morgan K. Morris

May 2016

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**Higher Education and Student Development
Taylor University
Upland, Indiana**

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

MASTER'S THESIS

This is to certify that the Thesis of

Morgan Kathryn Morris

entitled

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

has been approved by the Examining Committee for the thesis requirement for the

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Abstract

This study explored the value of campus traditions in higher education. Literature regarding tradition and campus traditions has answered the question “what is tradition?”, analyzed the emphasis on tradition in the Southern United States, and investigated the role of tradition in higher education. This 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 surfaced for higher education practitioners. This research confirmed the value of campus traditions and identified their specific value in higher education.

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Soli Deo Gloria. To God Alone Be The Glory.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The room is dark until spotlights shine on two people on 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. Brightly colored costumes, perfectly synchronized choreography, and medleys of clever parodies to popular songs cross the stage and fill the room. Students continue in song and dance for several minutes with broad smiles across their faces. This energetic, fun experience is Step Sing, a campus tradition at Samford University in Birmingham, Alabama (“Sigma Chi ‘Alley Cats,’” 2015).

Campus traditions exist throughout higher education, on virtually every college or university campus, with tradition defined as “the transmission of customs or beliefs from generation to generation” (“Tradition,” n.d.). In essence, campus traditions entail events and practices repeated across generations of students. “The idea of tradition on campus refers inevitably to connection—to the past, to people, to place. . . .” (Bronner, 2012, p. xiii). These connections prove significant as they allow students to come together and “feel a part of something larger than themselves” (p. xiii).

Many campus traditions center on athletics, while others focus on academics, Greek societies, or student clubs. Regardless of their affiliation, campus traditions provide an essential aspect of the campus environment and folklore (Bronner, 2012). In particular, campus traditions reflect the campus culture, impacted by a variety of factors,

including the surrounding community and region. In the South, with its commitment to Southern history, the correlation between culture and tradition appears quite strong (Joyner, 1999). As individuals feel linked to their homeland, they too feel tied to the institutions of this homeland. Campus traditions symbolize some ways this powerful connection is cultivated and passed from one generation to the next (Bronner, 2012).

Whether they become directly involved or place student leaders in positions to do so, higher education professionals must ensure their institutional traditions provide positive and meaningful experiences for students. Campus traditions help build campus community, and higher education practitioners play key roles in upholding that community and preserving these traditions (Strange & Banning, 2001). Thus, campus traditions prove valuable for the meaning they carry beyond the college experience. Not only do campus traditions contribute to campus culture, but “a large part of American culture involves college tradition” (Bronner, 2012, p. 6). A part of statewide and national societies, they carry an immense amount of value, defined as “the regard that something is held to deserve” (“Value,” n.d.). Campus traditions hold value in higher education.

Purpose Statement

The present study sought 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, 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?

Chapter 2

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 view traditions as not simply the continued repetition of an event, but also a connection from the present era to generations past (Bruns, 1991). The word tradition comes from the Latin meaning “something handed over” (Graburn, 2000, 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” (p. 6).

Especially when spelled with a capital “T,” tradition can prove meaningful to individuals and entire people groups. For many, traditions seem “almost equivalent to inheritance” as they pass from one individual, group, or generation to the next (Graburn, 2000, p. 6). Traditions carry weight and significance as they give “both identity and status” (p. 7). The existence and importance of traditions “is a strength to draw upon, a source of historically defined identity, and a source of a sense of safety, specialness, or difference” (p. 9).

The idea of tradition proves both abstract and concrete. From an abstract perspective, “tradition refers to an inherited body of customs and belief” (Handler & Linnekin, 1984, p. 273). Virtually any custom or belief can fall into this category and can

apply to an individual or people group. From a concrete viewpoint, tradition often seems a “material transaction” (Gross, 1992, p. 9). In this exchange, “stories, games, rituals, houses, and crafts” are “learned and transmitted in the unofficial social settings of family, play, work, and community” (Bronner, 2011, p. 20).

“In theory, everyone has traditions” (Bronner, 2011, p. 20). These traditions serve as part of almost all societies and cultures, particularly “folk” culture (Bronner, 2011). The term “folk” simply indicates a society or culture’s “expressive signals” as “traditional, but [they] also [have] a special naturalistic association with groupness, ordinariness, and often disempowerment, besides the idea of continuity with the past embedded in tradition” (Bronner, 2011, p. 20). Essentially, traditions are practices, beliefs, or ways of thinking in the present inherited from the past (Gross, 1992).

Tradition in the South

Traditions vary between individuals and groups as a part of “folk” culture (Bronner, 2011). In fact, “tradition is an antecedent to the terminology of folklore as common ‘knowledge of people’” (p. 29). Therefore, different ethnic groups, social societies, and even geographic regions have their own unique traditions. Due to its unique ways of life and many historical events such as the Civil War, the southern United States—often referred to as the South—stands out as one region with special traditions (Emrich, 1972).

History has a direct impact on culture, with the South as no exception (Joyner, 1999). The arts serve as one of the most apparent examples of culture, and during the Civil War, a highly specific culture formed in southern music. For example, “The Bonny Blue Flag” emerged as one of the most popular songs of the Confederacy. Although this

song did not refer to a specific flag, it reminded many southerners of the North Carolina and Texas state flags, making the song a popular cultural phenomenon many Southerners identified with and enjoyed (Emrich, 1972).

Even today, evidence of cultural differences between the northern and southern United States persists. The realm of politics offers one of the most apparent examples of these dissimilarities. The political contrast between the northern United States—also referred to as the North—and the South also dates back to the Civil War when Southern tradition developed significantly in America. Although many issues that started this movement look quite different today, the political divide still proves still much the same (Appleborne, 1996).

The rich history of the United States, particularly in the South, has thus fostered a unique culture. In the same way history impacts culture, it also affects folk culture. The Civil War greatly influenced music, politics, and aspects of folk culture, creating cultures specific to the North and the South. As culture is influenced, so are traditions, especially in the South. Many traditions are now unique to and shared among the American South (Joyner, 1999).

Tradition in Higher Education

Campus traditions did not always entail the large gatherings often thought of today. In fact, Rudolph (1990) noted campus traditions first came about in the 1840s among select few Greek letter organizations. By the early 1900s, campus-wide or traditions for all students outside of Greek organizations began to emerge, especially athletic traditions. Students wore school colors, supported their mascot, and sang fight songs and alma maters at sporting events (Thelin, 2004). Other more inclusive campus

traditions also continued to develop, specifically focused on generating institutional loyalty and unity among students (Van Jura, 2010).

The culture of a university plays an important part in the student experience. Higher education culture proves unique, coming in many different forms, all of which impact students:

Culture in higher education is defined as the collective, mutually shaping patterns of norms, values, practices, beliefs, and assumptions that guide the behavior of individuals and groups in an institute of higher education and provide a frame of references within which to interpret the mean of events and actions on and off campus. (Kuh and Whitt, 1988, p. 162)

As a significant part of the college years, campus culture serves many purposes during a student's experience. In particular, Kuh and Whitt (1988) 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 thus find deep roots in campus culture and accomplish many of the same meaningful purposes.

The idea of culture reflecting 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 occur officially and others unofficially, all traditions prove significant to the campus environment (Green, 2014).

As a result, campus traditions can prove valuable for students, as well as the campus community as a whole. “Because culture is bound to a context, every institution’s culture is different” (Kuh and Whitt, 1988, p. 162). This unique culture often draws students to an institution and makes the college or university special to its community. 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.

“As colleges and universities harnessed and co-opted college life, the particular institutions and traditions of a segment of the student body became established as the official institutions and traditions of the college” (Horowitz, 1987, p. 111). Over time, these established practices become tradition and repeat simply because they always have (Birnbaum, 1988). Administrators, faculty, staff, and students seem expected to know traditions of the institution and continue them for years to come (Komives & 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).

Implications

“Traditions play a unique role in the culture of student life” (Van Jura, 2010, p. 107). Few aspects of the college experience can replace or even compare to that of tradition. According to Van Jura, traditions teach students about the history of the institution, build community, instill common values across generations of students, and generate campus pride. However, traditions can also pose risks for students. For

example, commonly associated with negative campus traditions is the act of hazing. One study found, “college students are participating in unacceptable, high-rise, and potentially illegal behaviors in order to belong to a student group or team,” (Allan & Madden, 2008, p. 16). These activities can include—but do not remain limited to—drinking alcohol in excess, verbal harassment, sleep deprivation, and performing sexual acts.

When traditions go wrong, students can find themselves in danger. The responsibility thus falls to higher education professionals to protect students before protecting tradition. When a tradition poses a threat to the health and safety of any segment of the community, action must be taken to protect students’ well-being and correct students’ actions (Van Jura, 2010). Physically dangerous traditions are not the only traditions that must be avoided on college campuses. Traditions “that fail to create an inclusive environment” must also receive correction in order to promote campus unity (p. 107). Unfortunately, some traditions promote racism, sexism, and other negative behaviors. These types of behaviors conflict with the very purpose of tradition—to promote unity—and therefore institutions must reconsider these campus happenings.

In addition to assessing potentially harmful campus traditions, student development professionals and other campus personnel have a responsibility to help advance positive campus traditions as part of the overall campus environment. Student activities advisors “engage students in the opportunities of campus involvement in leadership” like campus events and customs (Komives & Voodard, 2003, p. 298). However, the development and support of the campus environment does not solely depend on these few student activities advisors. In fact, virtually all campus personnel interact with and influence students and therefore contribute to the campus environment.

One essential element of the advancement of the campus environment is building community, achieved through various means including campus traditions (Strange & Banning, 2001). Thus, the student development professionals who contribute to the campus environment must also play a critical role in the promotion and development of campus traditions.

Generally, “traditions are designed to foster feelings of community” (Van Jura, 2010, p. 107). With this goal in mind, the entire campus community and the surrounding community should be involved in traditions. For higher education professionals, such responsibility entails not only attending events but also truly supporting events. This assistance can include encouraging students who plan events, collaborating with student development professionals and student leaders to coordinate activities, intentionally assessing and addressing safety issues associated with specific occasions, and reaching out to include students who may feel excluded from campus traditions.

“Traditions can create a bond between students and their alma maters that lasts far beyond graduation” (Van Jura, 2010, p. 115). Higher education professionals must recognize the significance of campus traditions and their personal role within these traditions. Their support, encouragement, and assistance with preserving these traditions demonstrate their understanding of the value of these activities and their overall commitment to students. Campus traditions play integrals part in the college experience and must remain a priority, as “they give life to college” (Bronner, 2012, p. 28).

Tradition in Higher Education in the South

Traditions prove valuable and meaningful aspects of culture, as they connect individuals to other people and to a specific place. Appleborne (1996) explored ways in

which greater communities and regions, specifically the South, influence aspects of life including culture. The unique culture of the South fosters special campus traditions within its institutions of higher education. These traditions vary from athletics to academics, but all reflect the distinct culture of the institution and the South.

For example, the University of Arkansas (n.d.), a large public institution located in Fayetteville, Arkansas, has a unique academic tradition on its campus. Known as the Senior Walk, this tradition stands as “the university’s longest tradition both in length and years” (para. 7). The Senior Walk consists of over five miles of sidewalks on campus engraved with the names of University of Arkansas graduates. At present, over 150,000 names dating back to the year 1876 dot the sidewalks. This tradition celebrates its students and their academic achievement of graduating from the university.

Forty miles away, John Brown University (n.d.), a small faith-based institution located in Siloam Springs, Arkansas, has a unique athletic tradition. This tradition, known as the Toilet Paper Game, has become known as the “best technical foul in all of sports” (para. 2). For over thirty years, upon the first John Brown University basket at the first home basketball game of the season, fans throw rolls of toilet paper onto the court. Over 2,000 rolls of toilet paper flood the court, and John Brown University receives an automatic technical foul.

Samford University, the focus of the present study, has a unique song and dance tradition that celebrated its 64th anniversary in 2015 (Flynt, 2001). This tradition, known as Step Sing, involves almost 1,000 student participants each year (Samford University, n.d.c). With an undergraduate student body of just over 3,000 students, nearly one third of students participate in Step Sing (The College Board, 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 show every year (Step Sing 2015, n.d.). All proceeds from the ticket sales are used for philanthropic purposes (Samford University, n.d.c).

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” (Samford University, n.d.c, para. 6). Additionally, Step Sing serves as 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 appears “socially connective and culturally rooted” (Bronner, 2012, p. 5), compelling students socially to perform, or to support their peers, and thus furthering 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; Samford University, n.d.c).

Chapter 3

Methodology

Approach and Design

“Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world” (Creswell, 2013, p. 43). The current study found the researcher in the world of higher education. Within this field, the qualitative nature of the study allowed the researcher to explore “the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (p. 44). The researcher 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). The researcher chose one specific campus tradition and interviewed students and personnel involved with or who experienced this tradition. 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 (p. 76).

Context

The research took place at Samford University in Birmingham, Alabama. Founded in 1841, this Baptist institution has an extended history and numerous campus traditions (Samford University, n.d.b). As this study’s focus, Step Sing stands as one of

the most significant of these traditions. Established in 1951 when students lined up to sing outside the Old Main building on campus (Samford University, n.d.a), Step Sing now takes place indoors and involves nearly 1000 students (Samford University, n.d.c).

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 campus tradition. First and foremost, the study incorporated students as participants, including attendees of the campus tradition, participants in the campus tradition, and student leaders on campus. Additionally, the researcher invited campus personnel as participants. These personnel included faculty, staff, and administrators who coordinate, support, and invest in this campus tradition. In total, the researcher interviewed 20 students and personnel connected to the Step Sing tradition in order to gain a full understanding of the value of this tradition. Students and personnel have quite different involvement and experiences at their institution, but campus traditions often provide a shared aspect of campus life among these groups. The research included an equal number of student and personnel perspectives (10 students and alumni and 10 faculty, staff, and administrators) to gain a more holistic, comprehensive understanding of the value of campus traditions for the campus and surrounding community.

Instruments

The researcher created a set of interview questions (see Appendix A) to assess the value of the campus tradition from the perspective of both students and personnel. These questions developed after a review of the literature identified current trends and areas of interest. The researcher asked two questions asked of all participants: “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?"

Procedures

Upon attaining Institutional Review Board approval, this qualitative phenomenological study began with the analysis of archival materials on Samford's campus. This effort included reviewing documents, yearbooks, newspapers, programs, and other artifacts related to Step Sing. The researcher then identified potential interview participants based on their connection to and involvement with Step Sing. The researcher contacted these potential participants and asked if they would participate, while providing the option to decline. The researcher then again contacted students and personnel who agreed to participate to schedule individual interviews. Conducted during summer 2015, each of the 20 interviews were recorded and lasted approximately thirty minutes. Before beginning each interview, the participant signed a consent form (Appendix B).

Analysis

Archival research aided the researcher in understanding the historical context of this campus tradition. Interviews and archival research together aided the researcher in gaining a wider perspective of the value of the campus tradition within the campus culture. The recordings of interviews were transcribed, and the researcher coded these transcriptions for themes. These themes illustrated "what all participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon" (Creswell, 2013, p. 76). These commonalities proved essential in drawing conclusions from this qualitative, phenomenological study.

Summary

Qualitative phenomenological studies seek to describe the collective essence of a phenomenon based on the insights of individuals who experienced it (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 1990). The study sought to discover the comprehensive value of campus traditions based on the perceptions of students and personnel. Through archival research and interviews, the researcher sought to gather a holistic perspective.

Chapter 4

Results

Introduction

Tradition, especially in higher education, passes from one generation or group to the next (Graburn, 2000). This pattern of transmission creates both a historical and present context for tradition in higher education. Thus, this research sought to explore both contexts. Archival research revealed aspects of the historical context while interviews described characteristics of the present context.

Archival research entailed a document review at Samford University, where the interviews then 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 folklore.

Interview research took place 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. This research revealed the present context and value of this beloved campus tradition.

Archival Findings

Existing documents concerning Step Sing date back to the tradition's origins in the 1950s ([Step Sing leadership]). Initially, this document 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 (Pattee, 1928). The longevity of this tradition proves 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 professionally printed, full-color programs include with numerous photographs of current participants (“Step Sing,” n.d.).

Growth. Publicity for Step Sing dates back to 1951, according to the campus newspaper, the *Howard Crimson* (Samford University, 1951). This publicity continued for years and began to establish this event as a campus tradition as early as 1952. That year, the *Crimson* claimed, “all campus sings [will] resume . . .” as though this event had become an expected tradition (Samford University, 1952). Attention to this event proved especially important in relation to the on-campus dancing policy at Samford. At many institutions, especially historically Baptist institutions like Samford, dancing is often

disputed. Yet, in 1988, Samford officially sanctioned dancing (Easterling, 1988). As a result, the publicity and excitement for Step Sing only continued to grow.

Criticism. The researcher did not select the final archival theme highlighted 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). In this article, the author states, “Our proudest tradition is a 16-act musical. If you don’t see anything wrong with that, please visit an optometrist ASAP” (para. 17). While extreme in nature, this example demonstrates the pushback this tradition, like many other traditions in higher education, receives.

Interview Findings

As previously noted, the researcher interviewed students, faculty, staff, administrators, and alumni of Samford University in relation to Step Sing. The researcher conducted a total of 20 interviews—10 with students and alumni and 10 with faculty, staff, and administrators. All participants were in some way connected to the Step Sing tradition, ranging from coordinating the event to attending simply once.

Five themes emerged from these interviews to describe the value of Step Sing, and the value of campus traditions in higher education. These themes recognize the value of campus traditions as community, bonding, unity, connections, and identity.

Community. Participants believed the value of Step Sing stems from the community it creates. The Step Sing tradition engages with the campus community by

involving over a 1000 students each year, around one third of the undergraduate student body. The broad reach of this tradition even extends to the surrounding Birmingham community, from which many audience members come.

Renie Moss, the Assistant Dean for Campus Life at Samford, experienced first-hand Step Sing's wider community impact and claimed,

It brings the entire community together—every demographic of the campus, as well as the community. For some nights, there is always an ask-can we bring our show choir group to come see it and tickets are purchased from high schools and people in the area in general that want to be here.

Kyle Duncan, a Samford alumni and Resident Manager on staff at Samford, also experienced community engagement as a former Step Sing participant. He said, "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 performances, members of different acts often interact and support one another, creating bonds among all participants.

Nathan Taylor, the Assistant Director of Residence Life at Samford and a Samford Alumni, had minimal involvement with Step Sing during his undergraduate career at Samford. However, he still acknowledged the bonding it creates:

Yeah, I really I guess it meets the desires of the people who participate in it and that is something that people who have previously participating in it can

communicates to new participants. So it continues. But I don't know what it gives. Maybe a sense of camaraderie.

Samford alumni Josh Heath also experienced feelings of "camaraderie." In particular, he offered, "So, yeah 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. With its vast student involvement, this tradition can be described as broad reaching. Participants span from Greek organizations, independent groups, and even campus ministries, contributing to the unity that is experienced.

Samford University's President, Andrew Westmoreland, claimed, "Step Sing is our most significant unifying event for students and alums." He even referenced how more alumni often return for Step Sing than for Homecoming each year at Samford.

Taylor Durham, a current student at Samford, experienced the unity Step Sing brings firsthand. She said, "Like I really do think that it unites like all different people from campus."

Connections. Interview participants also believed in the valuable connections made through Step Sing. Each year during the Step Sing weekend, numerous alumni return to campus. In addition to former students making their way back to Samford, the campus simultaneously hosts a prospective student visit. Many of these students see the show and factor that 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 of witnessing the campus culture.

John Lundeen, an Assistant Professor and Graduate Nursing Simulation Coordinator at Samford, saw these connections on campus. He said the value of Step Sing exists in “of course 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.”

Cameron Gonzalez, a current student actively involved in Step Sing, recognized the innumerable connections this tradition creates at Samford. In particular, he said,

It also brings back a lot of alumni, brings back a lot of parents, a lot of donors, a lot of friends of Samford. So that is key for the admissions of Samford as well as furthering the campus life and the student engagement that takes place and that Samford is known for.

Identity. Interview participants recognize the value Step Sing carries in creating Samford’s institutional identity. As part of the institution for many years, Step Sing persisted as a critical campus tradition through waves of change and truly plays a part in the culture and identity of Samford.

Taylor Vassey, a current student at Samford and Resident Manager on campus, recognized the distinctiveness of Step Sing and offered, “Even people that come and see it like parents and visitors-it is something that sticks in their mind cause it is something that is so unique to Samford.”

Samford alumna and Senior Director of Alumni Programs and Annual Giving, Lauren McCaghren, realized the value of Step Sing in her undergraduate experience and her current role. As a result, she summed up what many others posited: “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.”

Conclusion

Over the years, the Samford University’s Step Sing has changed and grown, engaging and entertaining thousands of students and community members. As this event continued to develop, it also received forms of criticism. However, this condemnation quickly ceases when one considers the scope of influence this tradition holds. “For [over] 50 years, the largest and most respected tradition at Samford University has touched the lives of all that experience the rush of the performance and the thrill of victory” (“Step Sing 50th Anniversary”). Step Sing proves incredibly meaningful and valuable as a campus tradition at Samford University:

The traditions of a college are those bits of history, mostly unwritten, those events, customs, ideals, men, about which every student and alumnus of the college is supposed to know, but which are next to impossible to find in any book or collection of books. (Pattee, 1928, p. 3)

Step Sing stands out one of these traditions at Samford University and holds undeniable value. Both in historical and present context, individuals sought to further that value, and, through the years, the tradition has endured. In this research, archival findings revealed change, growth, and criticism as contributing factors to the development of Step Sing. Interview findings disclosed value in the community, bonding, unity, connections, and identity associated with Step Sing at Samford. Together, these archival and interview findings indicated the value of Step Sing as a campus tradition at Samford University.

Chapter 5

Discussion

Introduction

The Chronicle of Higher Education recently began a project to identify why campus traditions seem important and the value they bring to the student experience. So far, they highlighted traditions including freshmen literally fighting their way through upperclassmen as they are welcomed to campus, the rescue and conquest of an institution near closure, and even a rat funeral. In the future, the *Chronicle* plans to collect videos of campus traditions from around the country, documenting the context and perception of these traditions (Schmalz, 2015). One can only surmise campus traditions are of considerable value to a number of institutions of higher education.

This research contributed to the topic through an exploration of the value of campus traditions in higher education. At Samford University, in relation to the tradition of Step Sing, this value, in particular, rested in community, bonding, unity, connections, and identity.

Discussion

The study's research questions focused on identifying the value of this campus tradition from the perspective of students, personnel, and the community as a whole. The identified themes outlined various perceptions of value and revealed an agreement amongst participants. While students, faculty, staff, administrators, and alumni may

differ in their experience with this campus tradition, their understanding of its value proved consistent. Each identified theme found support in multiple perspectives and illustrated the validity of the value of campus traditions.

The value of this specific campus tradition seemed well known around campus. Although participants seldom used the same terminology as the identified themes, their language remained consistent with these ideas. Participants believed this tradition held value for themselves, others, and the community.

In a participant's understanding of its value, the enduring legacy of this campus tradition was also highlighted. Individuals who participated in the tradition or simply experienced its value first-hand as an observer desired to see it continue for others to experience. Furthermore, even individuals with a minimal personal attachment to the tradition believed it possessed valuable characteristics worth furthering. These countless understandings of this tradition's value contribute to its persistence and enduring legacy.

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 emerged. To begin, practitioners should promote beneficial campus traditions. Campus traditions like Step Sing involve a great deal of the community, generate positive results, and appear 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 demonstrates not only buy-in but also belief in the value the tradition carries.

This institutional belief benefits students, faculty, staff, administrators, and alumni who have the opportunity to join in supporting the campus tradition.

Additionally, many campus traditions continue each year simply because they become rituals their respective institutions “have always done.” Higher education professionals should ensure these traditions hold priority 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 an enduring future for these traditions. When the value of these traditions remains unidentified, traditions may lose their value or larger purpose within the campus community.

Moreover, communicating the value of campus traditions should become a priority of higher education professionals. 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 with campus traditions. Furthermore, when students, faculty, staff, administrators, and alumni understand the value, purpose, and significance of a tradition, they appear more likely to take part in it 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 campus traditions become detrimental, higher education professionals must respond. Detrimental campus traditions can harm 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. Their elimination or

reinvention needs to be communicated to the campus community. Higher education professionals should explain the tradition's current detriment and the plan of action to remove or improve the tradition.

Implications for Research

As a result of these findings, several implications for future research also surfaced. Initially, utilizing the identified themes of value in campus tradition, further efforts could explore how to create those valuable traits in new traditions, thus developing more valuable campus traditions. This further research might focus on gaining an understanding of the development of campus traditions in order to generate and enhance their value. Research could focus on the history of existing campus traditions, how their value established new traditions, what happens to create value, and how to create new and valuable campus traditions.

Further research could also explore how to make existing campus traditions more valuable. Countless campus traditions exist at colleges and universities around the country. This further research could explore ways to alter existing traditions to enhance their value and strive toward achieving the identified themes of value in campus traditions. 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.

Still, further research should continue to explore beneficial campus traditions, as well as harmful campus traditions, and identify how to distinguish between them. All students differ from each other; thus, a campus tradition benefitting one student may cause harm to another. However, numerous traditions are generally identified as

beneficial because of the value they carry or harmful due to the value they lack. Further research could continue to investigate how to promote valuable traditions and eliminate or reinvent harmful traditions.

Limitations

While this study identifies the value of campus traditions in higher education, it also comes with limitations. First, the breadth of the study remained 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 apply to the traditions of other institutions, this research proved limited in scope. As a result, efforts to extend this research need also to factor in the unique qualities of each campus and the individuals it represents.

Second, the student involvement in the Step Sing tradition appears relatively incomparable simply 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 individuals would likely offer anything negative to say in regards to Step Sing or would speak hesitantly if they did. The sheer size of this tradition possibly generated bias in the interviews due to the tradition's powerful and commanding presence on campus.

Third, this research took place during the summer when fewer students were present on campus. The researcher might have gained slightly different insights during the school year with altered or additional interview participants. Additionally, had the interviews taken place closer to the Step Sing event in February, results may prove extreme due to the immediacy of the campus tradition.

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 present, and enduring future due to its value. The value of Step Sing, and many other campus traditions, lies 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*, believed whole-heartedly in the value of campus traditions in the lives of students. In particular, Bronner claimed, "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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Appendix A

Interview Questions

Please state your name.

1. What is your role with/connection to Samford University?
2. What is your role with/connection to Step Sing as a member of the Samford Community? What has your experience been within that role?
3. How do you define tradition in relation to a college community?
4. In what way(s), if at all, does tradition play a role within the Samford community?
5. What traditions, if any, play the most critical role(s)?
6. What is Step Sing?
7. What are Step Sing's core functions and/or what is its purpose?
8. What is Step Sing's enduring value? What is the legacy of Step Sing?
9. What role does Step Sing play within the present Samford community and previous members of the immediate community such as alumni?
10. In what way(s), if at all, does Step Sing qualify as a tradition at Samford?
11. 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?
12. Is there anything else about the Step Sing Tradition that I need to know?

Appendix B

Consent Form

Research Participant Consent Form

Researcher Information

Campus Traditions
Morgan Morris
Taylor University
Samford University

Purpose of research

Research the value of campus traditions.

Procedures

1. Work with Samford University faculty and staff to determine students and personnel related to campus tradition to interview.
2. Contact students and personnel to see if they would be interested in participating.
3. Conduct and record 1-on-1 interviews with each of the 10-12 students and 10-12 personnel.
4. Transcribe interviews, organize data into trend groups, and draw conclusions

Duration

The research will occur summer 2015.

Risk

There are no known nor anticipated risks in this research. Any risks are equivalent to those that students would expect to encounter in daily life.

Benefits

Direct benefits are unknown.

Compensation

Participants will receive no compensation.

Voluntary Participation

Involvement in this research is voluntary. You must be 18 years of age or older to participate in the research.

Confidentiality

With the consent of the participant, identities and names may be used in the findings of this research. Due to the nature of this research, names of participants may be used to enhance and support the final results.

Sharing the Results

The findings of this research will be shared in a Thesis Defense. Additionally, this research, including the results, may be used for presentation at conference(s), for publication(s), or for other purposes to share with practitioners and researchers in the field of education.

Right to Refuse or Withdraw

Participation is voluntary, and students may withdraw at any time.

Who to Contact

If you have any questions at any time concerning this research, contact the Researcher, Morgan Morris at morgan_morris@taylor.edu or the Research Supervisor, Dr. Todd Ream at tdream@taylor.edu

This proposal has been reviewed and approved by Taylor University's IRB, which is a committee whose task it is to make sure that research participants are protected from harm. Questions regarding institutional research, including this research project, can be directed to Sue Gavin, Chair IRB, 765-998-4315 or ssgavin@taylor.edu

You may ask questions concerning the research before signing the following consent form.

I HAVE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO READ THIS CONSENT FORM, ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT THE RESEARCH PROJECT AND AM PREPARED TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS PROJECT.

 Participant's Signature

 Date

 Participant's Name

 Researcher's Signature

 Date

Credit: Purdue University IRB Guidelines

http://www.purdue.edu/research/vpr/rschadmin/rschoversight/humans/forms/Consent_Form_with_instructions_8-07.pdf

