SGA Inclusivity Final Paper

Multicultural Education—Spring 2014

Jayah Feliciano, Alyssa Young and Natalie Zamora

**Introduction** **(Written by Alyssa Young):**

Freema Elbaz-Luwisch, a professor at the extremely multicultural University of Haifa in Israel, works with both Israeli and Palestinian students, as well as students of complicated and mixed ethnic backgrounds who do not perfectly conform to the binary of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict. Elbaz-Luwisch questions if education is possible, stating that, “There’s a body in the middle of the room. We ignore it” (Elbaz-Luwisch 158). She refers to this body as a barrier to education, asking her readers to consider how education can be made possible, when the meaning and heart of understanding, resides in between, in the dialogue, and in the difference between those involved. We believe that a body exists within our own community at Bryn Mawr College. Our student government, Self-Government Association (SGA), prides itself on being “the first institution of higher education in the United States to give students responsibility not only for enforcing rules of behavior upon themselves, but also for deciding what those rules should be” ("About"). SGA also believes that it is an organization to which every student belongs—this is where our body lies. We are interested in gaining a better understanding and creating transparency on this campus through multicultural education about the inclusive and exclusive nature of our student government association. We believe that the majority of people who are involved in SGA are consistent, meaning that the same people who are elected year after year frequently hold the positions. The majority of the SGA assembly is comprised of those who are required to go due to their on-campus position, such as dorm president or hall advisor; this group tends to not be representative of the whole campus (ethnically, socio-economically, etc.). With these observations in mind, there are questions to be asked about who is not represented through SGA and why they are excluded.

To study, learn from, and listen to voices on campus about the inclusive and exclusive nature of our Self-Government Association we reached out to all affinity groups on campus and asked if we could meet with their group members and executive board and we reached out to SGA by asking for 20 minutes out of their Sunday agenda. Due to the semester wrapping up and groups being busy, we also sent along a survey that members of the club could fill out on their own time (although this option of participation was only used by one community member). We ended up meeting with South Asian Women (SAW), Sisterhood, Leverage (the zine), and we had one survey response from someone in both BACaSo (Black, African, and Caribbean Student Organization) and the NAACP (The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People). Finally, we asked for 20 minutes of our Multicultural Education class time to get another sample of people who were not necessarily in either an affinity group or a participating member of SGA. In these meetings and in the survey we asked the following questions:

* Do you feel SGA acknowledges difference between people and do they unite in this difference?
* What does it mean to participate in SGA?
* Who do you think doesn’t participate in SGA and why not?
* Is there enough transparency in SGA? Do you feel like you are “in the know” about SGA?
* Considering the latest campaign efforts ("I am SGA. I am Empowered"), what aspects of your identity (individually and as a group within/outside of SGA) contribute to feeling "empowered"?
* How can we make SGA more inclusive to people of diverse backgrounds (e.g. Sisterhood, BaCaSo, International Students)? How do we make this space a safe space for people to express their opinions?

While we wish we could have heard back from more student organizations and other campus presences, what we heard from all involved was illuminating and insightful in addressing “the body in the middle of the room.” Elbaz-Luwisch discussed how we ignore the body by explaining, “we don’t speak about it, we don’t look directly at it, we change the subject quickly if there’s a risk of noticing it. Sometimes, however, we have to ignore it by speaking about it—by saying the right things and then carrying on with our assigned topic.” This project hopes to speak about the body in the middle of our room properly—by addressing it, discussing it, and making it the center of attention with the intention of hopefully creating some change. We have broken our paper up into separate sections based on the different groups with whom we held discussions.

**The Sisterhood (Written by Jayah Feliciano):**

For the most part, the Sisterhood affinity group does not feel a part of SGA. They believe that SGA is disproportionately white and the representative council is not truly representative of the whole school. When asked to write initial thoughts on SGA, one of the responses read, “SGA is a relatively small group of students that are elected by a relatively small part of the student body. SGA addresses issues that these students feel are important.” A different comment read, “SGA- not truly representative; a source of power for some people.” Being that there are no Black students on the representative board, many members of the Sisterhood affinity group believe that the Black students’ voices are not being heard. In the SGA meetings, all members sit and listen to the representative council make decisions and vote. The question that the Sisterhood raised is: To whom are the SGA representatives talking to in order to decide on how to vote? The Sisterhood believes that the votes that are being made are not taking into account the thoughts or feelings that the Black students on campus possess. For example, the Sisterhood greatly expressed their anger in budgeting inequalities. SGA made a decision in funding providing “closed group” events only 100 dollars. This decision was newly added into the bill and did not go to plenary for the student body to vote; however, it is these “little” decisions that greatly affect groups like the Sisterhood. SAW also mentioned that they needed clarity on what an open v. closed group was. Many events that the Sisterhood was planning to hold were considered by SGA to be “closed,” although any member of the Bryn Mawr community could attend if they wanted. This, in turn, led to the Sisterhood receiving less money than any other affinity group. The Sisterhood believed that if a Black student were on the council, she would represent Sisterhood by informing the council that certain events were not closed, and possibly vote against this new decision that SGA made. This year, many of the Black freshmen are running for positions in SGA so that they can try to make a difference and represent the people of color on campus.

 While there is a brighter future ahead, there are other members of the Sisterhood who have no hope for SGA. When asking upperclassmen why they have not run for a position in SGA to change things, a junior stated, “SGA is a popularity contest. It is not about who is going to represent the community, but rather who knows the most people. I am not popular, so I did not run.” After the junior made this comment, many of the other members of the Sisterhood agreed. Since there is not a huge population of Black students on campus, it can be harder for them to assimilate depending on where they come from and their personality, which is why affinity groups are needed in the first place. It is a huge culture shock coming to Bryn Mawr for some members in the Sisterhood, and making friends with the majority of the campus, which is predominately white, can be a hard thing. From the comment from the junior and the reaction from the other members, it is clear that they believe that friendships or connections with much of the white population is needed in order to be elected into office.

 The Sisterhood made a suggestion that SGA could take in order to be more inclusive to affinity groups. SGA should show up to events and/or meetings to talk to people in affinity groups or just listen to problems or concerns that students of color face at Bryn Mawr College on a daily basis. If SGA signed up for the list serve, they would be able to see meeting topics and choose which meetings they wanted to attend. Many of the meetings that the Sisterhood have involve aspects of college life at Bryn Mawr that are not specifically for students of color; however, those concerns do come up in meetings as well. There may be commonalities amongst affinity groups. SGA should be perceptive as to who actually shows up to the SGA meetings, which are usually white students and very few students of color. If SGA really wanted to be inclusive, showing up to events is an easy way to do so. SGA would be able to take Black students’ voices into account, and incorporate them into decisions that the representative board votes on.

**Leverage (Written by Jayah Feliciano):**

Leverage is a group that provides a safe, creative space on campus for students of color. One does not have to be black, Hispanic, or Asian, but simply identify as a person of color to join. We spoke with members on the executive board in Leverage and when asked if they feel like SGA is inclusive, the immediate answer from each student was “no.” Instead of focusing on race, Leverage felt like they were not a part of SGA because they did not fit into the category of the “typical Bryn Mawr student.” Leverage feels like SGA does not acknowledge difference because they try to focus on what students have in common; however, this excludes students who cannot find this common ground. One member of Leverage stated, “SGA groups students together under moral behavior. They do not realize that an Asian queer mawrter is different from a Hispanic queer mawrter, or that a black mawrter can be different from a white mawrter.” Another member stated, “SGA’s idea of unity is acknowledging the common denominator, but we are not numbers. We are individual people.” Acknowledging these differences is an important step to including a wider range of Bryn Mawr students. Everyone is different and does not embody this idea of the “typical mawrter.”

 Leverage describes the typical mawrter as students who find it an obligation to attend all Bryn Mawr traditions, accept the culture of the school, and embrace the moral behavior, like the honor code. SGA does not acknowledge those students who come to Bryn Mawr specifically to study and not to participate in traditions, or the students who do not understand the honor code and think of it as a joke. Recently, SGA had a campaign called “I am SGA, I am empowered.” Through this campaign, SGA’s intent was to make sure all students know that they are a part of SGA and that they have a voice on campus. Leverage found this campaign to be ironic because instead of empowering them, it shamed them. Through the campaign, Leverage found that there was a clear division between those students who participate and those who do not. The campaign only empowers the students who participate in SGA, and those who do not feel like the “typical mawrter” and do not go to meetings are shamed rather than empowered. One member asked, “What happens when you go to an SGA meeting and you do not feel empowered?” Leverage felt that the campaign put blame on the students who do not attend SGA meetings and events, rather than reflecting on themselves and asking why the same people always attend meetings. SGA needs self-reflection. Although Leverage did not focus on race, it does not mean that race is excluded. When describing the “typical Bryn Mawr student,” a person of colors’ voice is often unheard, as the Sisterhood elaborated on earlier.

 According to Leverage, SGA has minimal power. While Leverage appreciates the idea and intent of SGA, they feel like it has stagnated. When it comes to institutional changes, students go unheard. Instead, there is always a committee being formed, which never has a follow through. One member of Leverage stated, “SGA is put in a difficult position because they have to listen to both the students and the administration. I do acknowledge this position; however, it seems that in the end, SGA caters to the administration. They do not force administration to make changes.”

 Leverage came up with a few suggestions to be more inclusive to the wider Bryn Mawr student that is not the “typical mawrter.” One suggestion was to have SGA representatives explain why they decided to become involved in SGA, because it could connect and influence other students to join. There is more value in finding connections to personal life, rather than making it an obligation to all students. Another suggestion was to assess whether SGA is relevant to the whole student body, and if not, SGA should have students of diverse backgrounds elected into SGA positions so that it appeals to a wider range of students.

**SAW (Written by Jayah Feliciano):**

SAW is another affinity group on campus for South Asian women. When asked if they felt like they were a part of SGA, they were split in their answers. The students who felt a part of SGA expressed that they felt a part of it as an individual, aside from the group. For example, one student stated, “Although I do not go to SGA meetings, I know what is going on with SGA because SGA is usually a topic of conversation between me and my friends.” This student has friends that are a part of SGA, which keeps her aware of what is occurring at meetings and she knows when there is an issue. But, what if students do not have friends that attend SGA meetings? How are they kept informed besides reading the long, drawn out minutes that may be unclear to them?

The students who felt that SGA was not inclusive to them examined SGA from an affinity group stance. For example, one of the presidents of SAW stated, “I was involved in SGA in freshman year. I noticed that as I moved up in my undergraduate year, my involvement in SGA declined. This year, I only went to SGA when SAW had budgeting problems, and it was a very intimidating space. It was like I committed a crime and I was waiting on my verdict.” This member of SAW did not like how SGA conducted themselves. It was very off-putting to them. Instead of being welcoming and inclusive, it pushed members of SAW away from being a part of SGA.

When asked who does not participate in SGA some answers included: people who come strictly for studying, people whose voices will not be heard, those who are not curious, people who do not feel included in that intimidating space, and those who do not feel affected by SGA.” These answers mirror some of what Leverage stated as not being the “typical mawrter.” Like Leverage, SAW felt that the “I am SGA, I am empowered” campaign was not inclusive to all of the students, although it was intended to be. They felt this way because it placed a large image on itself instead of the greater Bryn Mawr community; the words should have been “we are SGA, we are empowered” which would have included the person on the poster and the person reading. SAW feels that SGA does not bond with the greater community.

 SAW felt that SGA acknowledges difference, but they do not address these differences. This is the role of affinity groups. SGA represents students by categories, and not by identities. By categorizing students, it further diminishes identity. For example, there is a class president that is supposed to represent the whole freshman class; however, SGA needs to acknowledge the different identities that exist within these categories. One freshman does not embody the different identities of the freshman class. Being that identities are not acknowledged, SAW believes, in the words of one of the members, “we may all be a part of SGA through dues, but some people are more a part of SGA.” Those who are “more a part of SGA” are the “big leaders, and we are all just numbers.” This comment was not made in an angry way. Some of the members of SAW were perfectly fine with being just a number, in contrast to individuals in Leverage who did not want to be seen as a number, but rather as an individual with an identity. In addition, Sisterhood also acknowledged that SGA was for “some people,” which leads back to Leverage’s idea of the “typical mawrter.”

 In order to be more inclusive to SAW as group, they felt that SGA should reach out to groups from time to time. A simple check-in would show that SGA is present instead of being “around, but invisible.” An easy way to do that, which SAW suggested, was to have a representative from affinity groups on SGA, which could be the voice for the affinity groups. They would be able to voice concerns, which could apply to many women of color on campus.

**SGA (Written by Natalie Zamora):**

I have been going to SGA meetings every Sunday on-and-off for three years now, as I was a part of the SGA assembly my sophomore year and my senior year. I have attended every Plenary since my first year and I even became a committee member to plan and execute six Plenaries. I personally consider myself “a part” of SGA. I want to explain my positionality in SGA before explaining the results, because if the assumption of this project is that SGA can be exclusive by nature, then I would consider myself an “insider”.

Typically, many people from the assembly do not contribute to the discussion at hand. There are people in the SGA assembly (regardless of how many people come and go through graduation of appointments committee) that speak out consistently, and then there are people who sit on their laptops doing homework or updating their facebook. I would know, because most of the time I am one of those people who does not pay attention to the topics of discussion. Those who speak up more are often the ones who bring up the constitution and the general democratic SGA jargon that, at least for me, makes me want to jump into the conversation even less. The tone of this SGA meeting is similar. Some people are paying attention and some never make eye contact with us as we are announcing the goal of this project.

After dividing into groups and moving groups to various parts of the campus center, it is clear that there are a handful of students in the SGA assembly who have chosen not to participate in the discussion. They look down at their laptops or books and sit in their seats, all sitting in the same area. These are the same people who tend to dominate the discussion in normal SGA meetings, asking questions to presenters about how the topic is relevant to, or appropriate for, SGA. I cannot make inferences as to why they did not participate when they normally do. Perhaps they had a lot of homework to complete.

The SGA presentation was more difficult to manage due to the sheer size of the assembly. We split the group into 6 groups of around 5-7 people while our project members walked around and tried to peer into the conversation happening. With so many groups, it was hard to be involved in every conversation or make sure that everyone was writing something down on the questions sheet that we had handed out so we could record their responses.

As a part of the SGA initiative in the most recent years, the SGA executive board and assembly are trying to expand the ways in which SGA permeates the school. They have tried to get people to understand that everyone, whether you go to SGA meeting or not, is a part of SGA (thus, the campaign, “I am SGA. I am Empowered”). In discussion of the questions about whether SGA recognizes difference and this recent campaign, many groups noted that SGA focuses on uniting in “sameness.” One group wrote, “we don’t acknowledge difference” and “only a few voices get heard.” In an effort to have everyone identify as a part of SGA, perhaps even the SGA assembly acknowledges that they may be ruling out important difference within the student body. Though the discussion is very much centered on differences in opinion, rather than differences in background or methods of engagement, the SGA assembly does understand that the democratic aspect of SGA does not recognize everyone.

Participating in SGA meant, for many groups, the most conventional modes of participation: voting, running for elected and appointed positions, coming to SGA meetings, and attending Plenary. However, in answering the question regarding who does not participate in SGA, one group noted, “there’s not much expectation to go to weekly SGA meetings; many friend groups participate together.” Another group names groups of people that they feel might not participate: “international students, first years, people who feel they’re busy, those who don’t feel SGA is affecting them.”

If the students that one group named do not participate in SGA, and entire friend groups tend to participate in SGA together, then there is a large population of students who are underrepresented, as well as a lack in diverse opinions within the SGA assembly itself. Many friends share similar views and if friend groups circulate through the SGA assembly, it is possible that diverse opinions may be few (on top of the idea that some “voices go unheard” during SGA meetings and Plenary). Another discussion group explained the “cycle” of participation by which groups who do not feel comfortable or “in the loop” will not come to SGA meetings, which leads to a continued lack of participation. This cycle, though logical, might actually blame the non-participators for not coming and not being involved; as if those students who want to be in-the-know need to come to SGA so this can happen.

**Multicultural Education (Written by Natalie Zamora):**

As mentioned in the introduction, the Multicultural Education class plays mediator to the discussion talked about at SGA and the discussion talked about in the various affinity group meeting we have had. Our class is not limited to those who attend weekly SGA meetings or those who identify as students of color; it is a blend.

Our class is host to Haverford students as well, which gives this project a potentially interesting twist, as we get the perspective of a college that has a similarly structured governing system. Haverford’s SGA equivalent is called Student Council, and because we understand that this group must be different than SGA, and that Haverford students may not know how to speak to the issues of inclusivity within SGA, we asked the Haverford student participants to discuss the questions as it relates to their Student Council. As our focus is on Bryn Mawr’s Self Government Association, the Haverford perspective will be considered, but not entirely analyzed.

After splitting the class in three groups, each of our project members guided the group discussions. As it is a classroom setting, the kinds of responses from the students were more formally worded than those we collected at SGA or the affinity group meetings. Some of the topics that the groups talked about revolved around how SGA does not affect them or does not interest them. Some responded that the topics discussed in SGA meetings or at Plenary did not interest them because they were not things they could relate to. These statements point out a question that has been posed in other affinity group discussions about the relevance of SGA. Additionally, students contested the intentions of Plenary. While some students believe that Plenary is a safe space to introduce different opinions and debate contested topics, others expressed that they simply valued the space as one in which to vote on resolutions. Students brought up the point that the most recent Plenary failed to continue once a discussion around gender pronouns in the Bryn Mawr constitution continued extensively, and those who had come only to decisively vote became frustrated. Maintaining a space for democracy is incredibly difficult when students enter Plenary with very different intentions as to how they expect to participate.

**Conclusions (Written by Alyssa Young):**

Based on our conversations across campus, a considerable number of students have expressed feeling excluded from an organization that advertises itself of being inclusive of the whole campus. Many of these students are statistical minorities on campus based on their race and ethnicity. Surely there is no question that it is SGA’s responsibility to be attentive to all students needs and thoroughly represent the campus in which it claims to influence so dramatically. As a result of what we have heard from many voices, we have come up with a few recommendations of how SGA could become a more inclusive democratic system that both recognizes and embraces diversity.

 We recommend that SGA needs to systematically look into who on campus feels represented by SGA and who does not. Rather than placing the blame for lack of attendance on specific affinity groups, SGA must take the time to seriously consider why it is that these groups do not feel welcome in a space supposedly designated for the entire student body. On that note, SGA must consider the definition it has established (whether subconsciously or more formally) of the “typical mawrter.” Our belief (and the belief of many of the individuals we spoke to over the course of this project) is that, if this question is considered, members of SGA will realize that it is impossible to define a “typical mawrter.” For this reason, slogans like “I am SGA, I am empowered,” are problematic and take away from the recognition and celebration of diversity we deserve to find on campus—particularly in student-run organizations. We suggest that there be an interplay between SGA and affinity groups on campus. This may mean that SGA makes a space for representatives of affinity groups to attend meetings (as something more than a simple spectator). It may also mean that SGA representatives attend important meetings of affinity groups. This particular recommendation would be useful in that it would emphasize SGA’s role in serving all facets of the community, rather than the other way around.

 Many students, whether they are members of affinity groups or not, struggle to understand SGA’s purpose. They do not see SGA making what they consider to be important decisions, and feel that the association caters to the administration over the needs of the student population (and if this is really the case, there should be little need for SGA at all). This must be changed. As we have established, a significant aspect of this issue is the cycle that is caused when students refuse to attend Plenary or SGA meetings out of a feeling that it is pointless—which, in turn, renders the meetings essentially useless, and the cycle continues. However, the issue is bigger than this cycle when even the decisions that are made are not considered significant enough by the student population to encourage them to attend meetings. Understandably, SGA cannot truly “rule campus”—this is what the administration is for. But if SGA cannot make decisions significant enough for students to care, due to the power of the administration, then there seems little purpose for SGA to exist at all.

Our investigation could be majorly improved if it were to have been conducted with more time. It would have been more effective if we could have received the input of a larger representation of the college and could have heard from more people who were in affinity groups, SGA (i.e. not just those who were there at the meeting we attended, but those who feel like a participating member of SGA), and maybe even other members of the Bryn Mawr community, such as professors and administrators. It would have been interesting to get the insight of professors and administrators as they are voices on campus that see SGA for a longer period than four years and also the administration could give an interesting perspective as they work directly with SGA. Our work could have also been improved if we had been able to speak for longer periods of time with the groups. Had we been able to spend more time with the groups we would have been able to “warm them up” to the ideas that we are talking about, a possible flaw of our design was that we only asked for 20 minutes with groups and with such little time we had to cut to the chase which did not give students much time to process the information we were providing them and did not give them much time to respond or think through their answers. Finally, our work could have been improved if we had been able to have SGA and affinity groups come together to discuss the ways in which we represent our campus community. Of course, many of these options aren’t out of the question simply because this semester is wrapping up. It would be beneficial to continue this work in more depth, with more time. It goes without saying that this work is of critical value to our community as the risks of marginalization are underway and far too high. Nancy Mairs, author of On Being a Cripple, wrote, “‘Marginality’…means something altogether different to me from what it means to social theorists. It is no metaphor for the power relations between one group of human beings and another but a literal description of where I stand (figuratively speaking): over here, on the edge, out of bounds, beneath your notice. I embody the metaphors” (*Quotes for Multicultural Education Class*).

**References:**

"About." *Self-Government Association*. Bryn Mawr College, n.d. Web. 6 May 2014. <http://sga.blogs.brynmawr.edu/about/>.

Cohen, Jody. *Quotes for Multicultural Education Class*. N.p.: n.p., n.d. Word Document.

Elbaz-Luwisch, Freema. "How Is Education Possible When There's a Body in the Middle of the Room?" *Narrative & Experience in Multicultural Education*. Ed. JoAnn Phillion, Ming Fang. He, and F. Michael. Connelly. London: Sage, 2005. 157-74. Print.