

# Students' Reported Political Engagement and Knowledge in a Politically Charged Environment

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## ABSTRACT

Research has shown that student involvement on college campuses is associated with their overall college satisfaction (Webber, Krylow, Zhang, 2013) and that college students have low political knowledge and involvement (Bernstein, 2005; Beaumont, Colby, Ehrlich, & Torney-Purta, 2006). At the University of Wisconsin - Eau Claire, the campus climate is currently politically charged due to proposed economic challenges, specifically the proposed state mandated budget cuts to the University of Wisconsin System. Based on Impression Management Theory, in a social situation where high political knowledge may be expected, it is possible that students either over report their knowledge or decide not to become involved in political activities. This study surveyed students at the University of Wisconsin - Eau Claire to test for relationships between reported political involvement and knowledge and impression management efforts. Findings are useful for understanding how students self-report their knowledge and involvement in a politically charged climate.

## METHODS

### SAMPLE

- Surveyed participants included 84 students from the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. Students self-identified as:
  - Male – 19
  - Female – 63
  - Other – 1
  - Freshman – 3
  - Sophomore – 8
  - Junior – 24
  - Senior – 39
  - Super Senior – 7
  - Other – 1
- Sent survey via email and social media
- Survey consisted of questions regarding political knowledge, political involvement, college satisfaction, college success and students' impression management

### INSTRUMENTS

- Noel-Levitz Student Satisfaction Inventory-Form B (Juillerat and Schreiner, 2006)
  - Sample Question: *Students are made to feel welcome here.*
    - $\alpha=.86$ ,  $M=48.33$ ,  $SD=6.01$
- Political/Budget Knowledge & Political/Budget Involvement (Carlson, Daley, Drewiske, Ellefson, & Nelson, 2015)
  - Political Knowledge Sample Question: *I actively seek out information about politics.*
    - $\alpha=.94$ ,  $M=15.14$ ,  $SD=4.83$
  - Budget Knowledge Sample Question: *I am knowledgeable about the impact that the budget cuts would have on UWEC directly.*
    - $\alpha=.90$ ,  $M=16.05$ ,  $SD=4.36$
  - Political Involvement Sample Question: *I engage in conversations regarding politics.*
    - $\alpha=.90$ ,  $M=22.18$ ,  $SD=5.66$
  - Budget Involvement Sample Question: *I actively seek out information concerning the state mandated budget cuts to the UW System.*
    - $\alpha=.74$ ,  $M=17.24$ ,  $SD=4.68$



Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker



University of Wisconsin- Eau Claire Centennial Hall



University of Wisconsin- Eau Claire students

## DISCUSSION

Previous studies have shown that students who are more involved on campus are more satisfied with their college experience. This study identified that students were above average in their involvement in regards to politics and the state mandated budget cuts to the UW System, but there is no correlation between their college satisfaction and these variables. This is because many factors contribute to overall college satisfaction. Previous studies had not focused on knowledge and involvement in a politically charged environment.

Our results showed that students are more likely to use impression management efforts if they are less politically knowledgeable and involved. This could be due to the fact that students may consciously try to manage how others perceive them in a politically charged environment. In these situations students feel they should know more than they actually do.

In the future, researchers should replicate this study after the implementation of the state mandated budget cuts to the UW System to reevaluate college satisfaction and students' impression management efforts.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND RESULTS

**Research Question 1 (RQ1): How knowledgeable do students believe they are as it relates to (a) political issues and (b) the current state mandated budget cuts to the University of Wisconsin System?**

- (a) 42% of students surveyed reported above average overall political knowledge, while 34% of students surveyed reported below average overall political knowledge
- (b) 65% of students surveyed reported above average political knowledge regarding the state mandated budget cuts to the UW System, while 19% of students surveyed reported below average political knowledge regarding the state mandated budget cuts to the UW System

**Research Question 2 (RQ2): How involved do students believe they are as it relates to (a) political issues and (b) the current state mandated budget cuts to the University of Wisconsin System?**

- (a) 47% of students surveyed reported above average overall political involvement, while 35% of students surveyed reported below average overall political involvement
- (b) 52% of students surveyed reported above average involvement regarding the state mandated budget cuts to the UW System, while 27% of students surveyed reported below average involvement regarding the state mandated budget cuts to the UW System

**Research Question 3 (RQ3): Is college satisfaction associated with the state mandated budget cuts (a) involvement and (b) knowledge?**

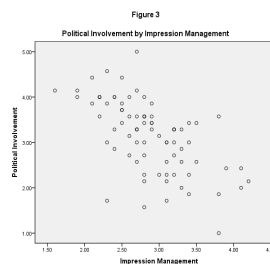
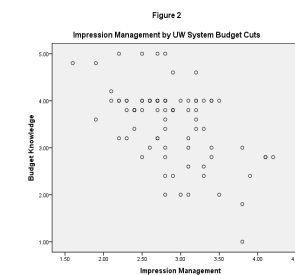
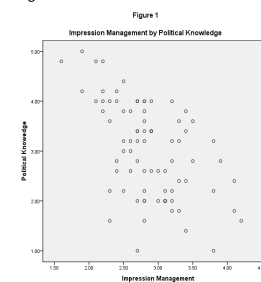
There is no correlation between college satisfaction and a student's involvement and knowledge regarding the state mandated budget cuts to the UW System.

**Research Question 4 (RQ4): Is college success associated with the state mandated budget cuts (a) involvement and (b) knowledge?**

There is no correlation between college success and a student's involvement and knowledge regarding the state mandated budget cuts to the UW System, this does not support previous findings.

**Research Question 5 (RQ5): Are impression management efforts correlated with (a) political knowledge and (b) political involvement?**

Students actively manage their impressions regarding (a) political knowledge, (b) state mandated budget cut knowledge, (c) political involvement and (d) state mandated budget cut involvement. Impression management was negatively correlated with (a) political knowledge,  $p<.01$ ,  $r=-.53$ , (b) state mandated budget cut knowledge,  $p<.01$ ,  $r=-.51$ , (c) political involvement,  $p<.01$ ,  $r=-.61$  and (d) state mandated budget cut involvement,  $p<.05$ ,  $r=-.31$ . This shows that the more knowledgeable and involved students are the less students manage their impressions regarding their political knowledge and involvement.



## CITATIONS

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