

# Development of Self-Determination through Student Government Association Activism

## Abstract

Student Government Association (SGA) activism is a way to voice student concerns and needs. Many community college students work and commute to campus, and thus may not have time to raise important issues on campus. SGA activism is one way that adolescents and young adults can express their autonomy in making important political decisions (Ozer & Wright, 2012). By campaigning for office and running a student government, SGA officers express their opinions, pursue their goals, and build a sense of belonging and social connection. Self-Determination Theory suggests that all people have three psychological basic needs: 1) autonomy, or the right to self-govern; 2) competence, a feeling of mastering important tasks, and 3) relatedness, or being socially connected to others. We believe SGA activism has the potential to satisfy all three of these needs. Thus, we created an anonymous, online survey to explore levels of self-determination and psychological need satisfaction, as well as factors that might predict need satisfaction, among SGA officers at Kingsborough Community College. To craft the survey, we first adapted items from the Basic Psychological Need Satisfaction and Frustration Scale (BPNSFS; Chen, Vansteenkiste, et al., 2015) to create a shortened 9-item scale tailored to an SGA officer leadership context. The survey also contains questions inquiring about SGA officers' goals, their conceptions of leadership, their activist commitments and intentions, the meaning of student governance in their lives, how much psychological time they spend outside of meetings with other SGA officers, and their preferred modes of communication with other officers. We distributed this 10–15-minute survey at a Kingsborough SGA meeting in March, with the support of the SGA Faculty Advisor. We found that officers who were higher in activist identity showed higher psychological needs satisfaction. We also found that officers who were more likely to donate to a political cause showed higher psychological needs satisfaction. Officers who felt they had made more progress towards their personal SGA goals also had higher psychological satisfaction. Furthermore, officers in the Vice President role had higher psychological need satisfaction than officers in the Senator role. Officers who spent more time with their fellow officers outside SGA meetings showed higher psychological needs satisfaction. We looked at what mode of communication officers preferred, finding that officers who preferred in-person and video conferencing had higher psychological needs satisfaction than those who preferred social media and text. Data analysis is still ongoing.

## Rationale and Theory

- Student Government Association (SGA) activism is one way that young adults can express autonomy and make decisions (Ozer & Wright, 2012).
- At a community college, students are not always able to voice their concerns and needs, and student clubs have declined in general (Seltzer, 2024).
  - Many CC students work and commute to campus
  - They may not have time to raise important issues on campus
- By campaigning for office and running a student government, SGA officers can express their opinions, pursue their goals, and build a sense of belonging and social connection.

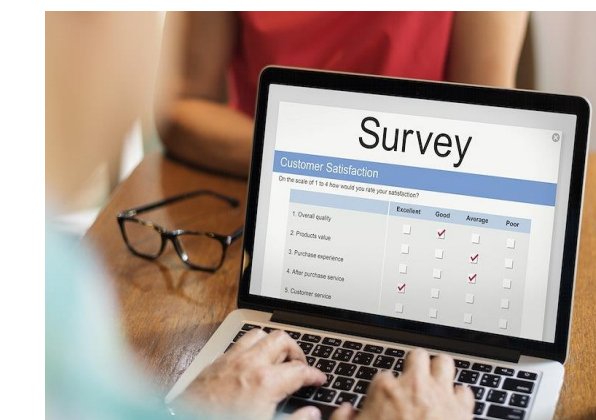
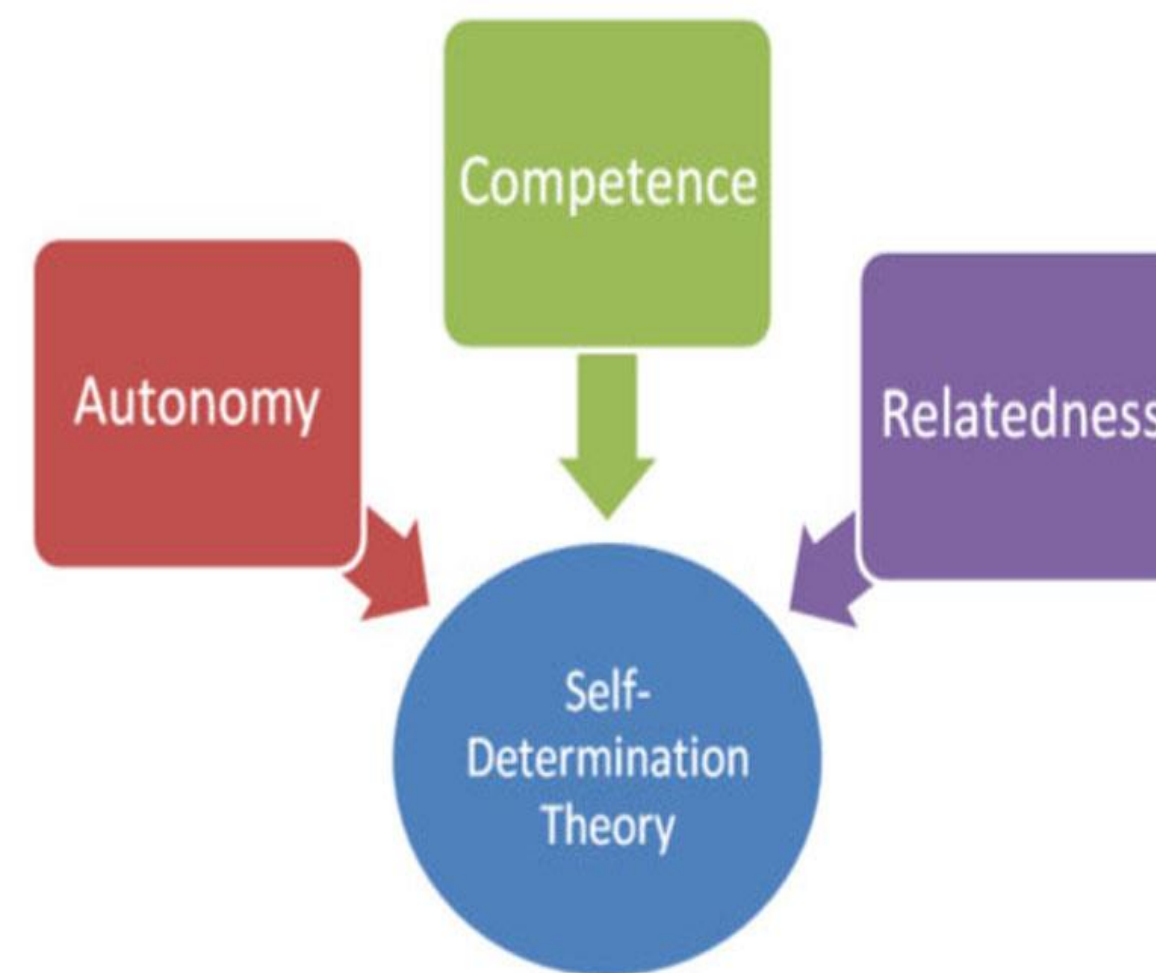
**Self-Determination Theory** (Deci & Ryan, 2012) suggests that all people have 3 Basic Psychological Needs:

- 1) autonomy – the right to self-govern
- 2) competence – a feeling of mastering important tasks
- 3) belonging/relatedness – being socially connected to others

We believe SGA activism has the potential to satisfy all three of these needs.

## Method

- We created an anonymous, 15-minute online survey to explore levels of self-determination among SGA officers.
- We distributed it to 18 SGA officers; 11 completed it.
- We first adapted items from the Basic Psychological Need Satisfaction and Frustration Scale (BPNSFS; Chen, Vansteenkiste, et al., 2015)
- We made a shortened 9-item scale tailored to an SGA officer context.
- The survey also contains a few questions (text entry and Likert scale) on SGA Officers':
  - Goals within the SGA
  - Conceptions of leadership
  - Activist commitments and intentions (AICS; Klar & Kasser, 2009)
  - Time spent outside of meetings with other SGA officers
  - Preferred modes of communication with other officers
  - The meaning of student governance in their lives



## Conclusion

### Activism and Autonomy

- Officers' with activist identities and behavioral tendencies toward political action seemed to have greater psychological need satisfaction
- For example, officers who were higher in activist identity showed higher psychological needs satisfaction.
- In addition, officers who were more likely to donate to a political cause showed higher psychological needs satisfaction.

### Competence and Achievement of SGA Goals

- Officers who felt they had made more progress towards their personal SGA goals also had higher psychological satisfaction.
- Officers in the higher-ranking Vice President role had higher psychological need satisfaction than officers in the Senator role.

### Social Relatedness among Student Government Officers

- Officers who spent more time with their fellow officers outside SGA meetings showed higher psychological needs satisfaction.
- Officers who preferred in-person and video conferencing had higher psychological needs satisfaction than those preferring social media and text.
- This suggests that face-to-face interaction (in person or on video) may be more beneficial than indirect social media interaction
- Analysis of written data (e.g., officers' goals in the SGA, how they conceptualize leadership) is still ongoing.

## Results

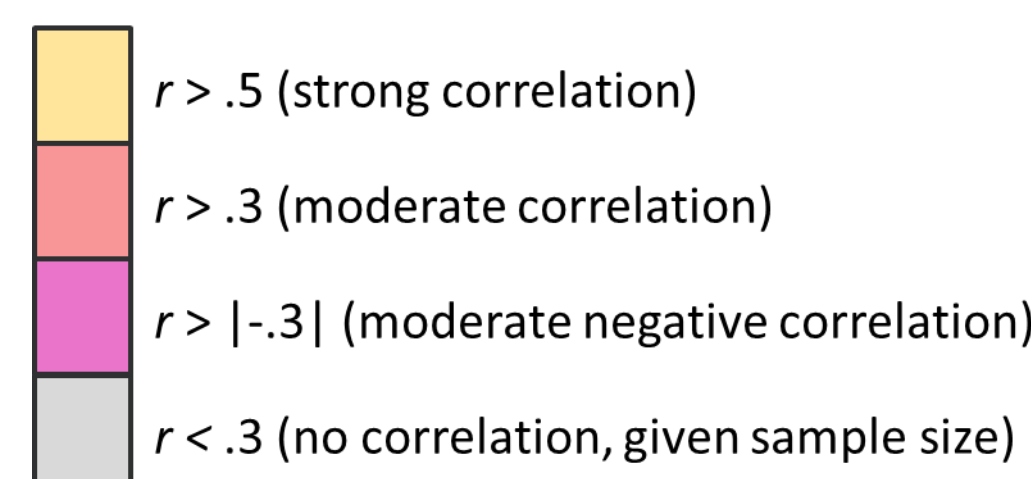
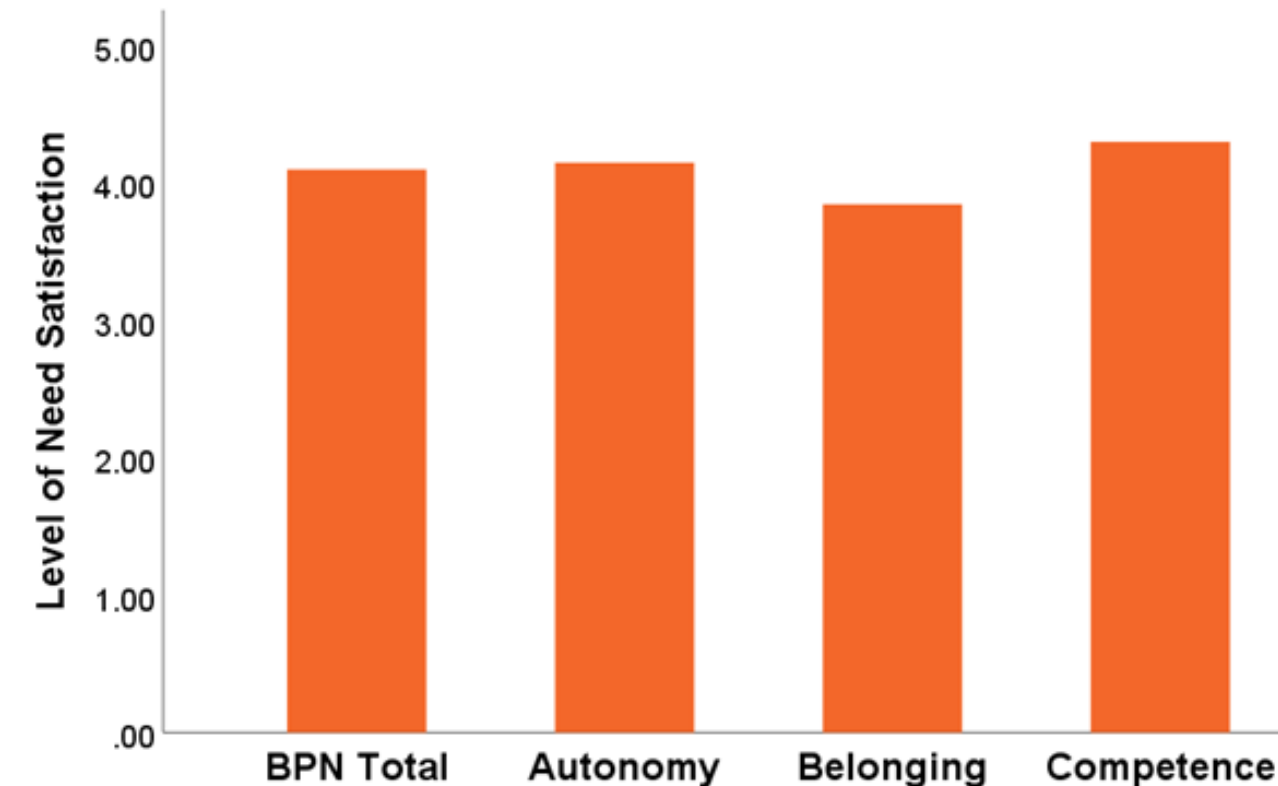
Participant Ages

- 18-21 years old: 5
- 22 and older: 6

Role within SGA

- 6 Senators
- 5 Vice Presidents

Average Levels of Basic Psychological Need Satisfaction Among SGA Officers at KCC



### What variables are related to Basic Psychological Need Satisfaction?

|  | BPN Total                         | Autonomy                          | Belonging                      | Competence                     |
|--|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Activist Identity and Commitment (AICS)            | $r = .408$<br>( $p = .213$ )      | $r = .218$<br>( $p = .519$ )      | $r = .526$<br>( $p = .097$ )   | $r = .404$<br>( $p = .218$ )   |
| Activist Orientation (AOS) – Total                 | $r = .065$<br>( $p = .850$ )      | $r = .042$<br>( $p = .901$ )      | $r = .039$<br>( $p = .908$ )   | $r = .103$<br>( $p = .764$ )   |
| Activist Orientation (AOS) – Meetings              | $r = -.069$<br>( $p = .840$ )     | $r = -.178$<br>( $p = .600$ )     | $r = -.166$<br>( $p = .627$ )  | $r = .199$<br>( $p = .557$ )   |
| Activist Orientation (AOS) – Risky Activism        | $r = -.128$<br>( $p = .708$ )     | $r = .037$<br>( $p = .915$ )      | $r = -.087$<br>( $p = .800$ )  | $r = -.350$<br>( $p = .292$ )  |
| Activist Orientation (AOS) – Donating              | $r = .747^{**}$<br>( $p = .008$ ) | $r = .743^{**}$<br>( $p = .009$ ) | $r = .657^*$<br>( $p = .028$ ) | $r = .634^*$<br>( $p = .036$ ) |
| Activist Orientation (AOS) – Online Activism       | $r = -.090$<br>( $p = .792$ )     | $r = -.236$<br>( $p = .484$ )     | $r = -.058$<br>( $p = .865$ )  | $r = .091$<br>( $p = .790$ )   |
| Progress Toward SGA Goals                          | $r = .663^*$<br>( $p = .026$ )    | $r = .762^{**}$<br>( $p = .006$ ) | $r = .685^*$<br>( $p = .020$ ) | $r = .317$<br>( $p = .342$ )   |
| SGA Role   | $r = .354$<br>( $p = .286$ )      | $r = .109$<br>( $p = .751$ )      | $r = .391$<br>( $p = .235$ )   | $r = .527$<br>( $p = .095$ )   |
| Percent of Time Spent with SGA Outside of Meetings | $r = .314$<br>( $p = .347$ )      | $r = .361$<br>( $p = .276$ )      | $r = .249$<br>( $p = .461$ )   | $r = .233$<br>( $p = .490$ )   |
| Communication – Text                               | $r = -.282$<br>( $p = .401$ )     | $r = -.402$<br>( $p = .220$ )     | $r = -.063$<br>( $p = .855$ )  | $r = -.285$<br>( $p = .396$ )  |
| Communication – Social Media                       | $r = -.184$<br>( $p = .587$ )     | $r = -.326$<br>( $p = .328$ )     | $r = -.030$<br>( $p = .930$ )  | $r = -.116$<br>( $p = .734$ )  |
| Communication – In Person                          | $r = .491$<br>( $p = .125$ )      | $r = .236$<br>( $p = .484$ )      | $r = .467$<br>( $p = .147$ )   | $r = .706^*$<br>( $p = .015$ ) |
| Communication – Video Conferencing                 | $r = .449$<br>( $p = .166$ )      | $r = .326$<br>( $p = .328$ )      | $r = .445$<br>( $p = .171$ )   | $r = .482$<br>( $p = .134$ )   |

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