

Patterns of and Motivations for Student Participation in Planning a College Town: Geneseo, NY

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INTRODUCTION

Public participation is integral to the urban planning process. Planning and community development may be the work of professional planners and consultants, but its purpose is to better the quality of life, and the health and safety of a community and its residents. Thus, public engagement should come in the form of public meetings, advisory groups, and even citizens' research into current events and trends in their community. The functions and dynamics of public input have been heavily researched in academia; however, as every community is unique and complex, an important question arises: what specific factors within a community influence the nature and quality of its citizens' participation in the planning process?

This study answers this question among the student population of the State University of New York (SUNY) at Geneseo. **Figure 1** shows the location of this university in western New York. Students, in general, are an important part of any college town, and should be involved in planning its future. However there is often tensions and dissonance between campus and town populations in terms of social harmony, safety, and more (Hatcher, PATIMES). This relationship between university students and the permanent residents and planners of the encompassing community is often referred to as "town-gown relations." The scope of this research focuses on the student-side of this issue.

I hypothesize that the three most prominent influences on the nature of public participation in planning, would be citizens' knowledge of where/when/how they can participate, citizens' knowledge of how planning affects them and their community, and citizens' level of motivation to be civically active in their town planning process. This research provides valuable insight into the motivations for and influences on student engagement in planning, and provides a basis for strategizing how to improve student participation, and ultimately town-gown relations.

METHOD

SURVEY METHOD

Digital surveying was used to collect data on the student population. A sample group of 70 SUNY Geneseo students was sampled, comprised of various ages, backgrounds, and fields of academic study. The goal of this survey was to compose a picture of how much this sample group has participated in planning and why. Questions included multiple choice, ranking, and open-ended formatting.

The survey included the following questions:

1. What [academic] year are you?
2. Are you a permanent resident of Livingston County?
3. Have you ever completed coursework related to planning?
4. Have you ever attended a planning meeting for the Town of Geneseo, Village of Geneseo, or for Livingston County?
5. If you are not from Livingston County, have you ever attended a planning meeting in your home community?
6. Do you know how planning affects your community? If so, describe some examples which you consider to be most important to your quality of life.
7. Rank your level of motivation to participate in planning efforts in Geneseo.
8. Are you aware that as a member of your community you can influence planning decisions?
9. Do you know where and when planning meetings are conducted in your community?
10. What media platform would be most effective in delivering info on planning meetings and activity to you? List as many as apply.

INTERVIEW METHOD

Supplemental data was also collected through interviewing local planning professionals. Interviewees included two members of the Geneseo Village Planning Board, and two members of the Geneseo Village Board of Trustees one of which is also the Mayor. Participants were asked their perception of student participation in planning, their opinions on the reasons behind these patterns, and on why students should participate in planning their university communities.

SURVEY RESULTS

- Participants: 34 seniors, 19 juniors, 8 sophomores, 9 freshman
- 87% of group are not permanent residents of Livingston County
- 55% have completed planning-related coursework, 45% have not
- 59/70 participants know what planning is and can list one or more ways in which it affects their community

Figure 1



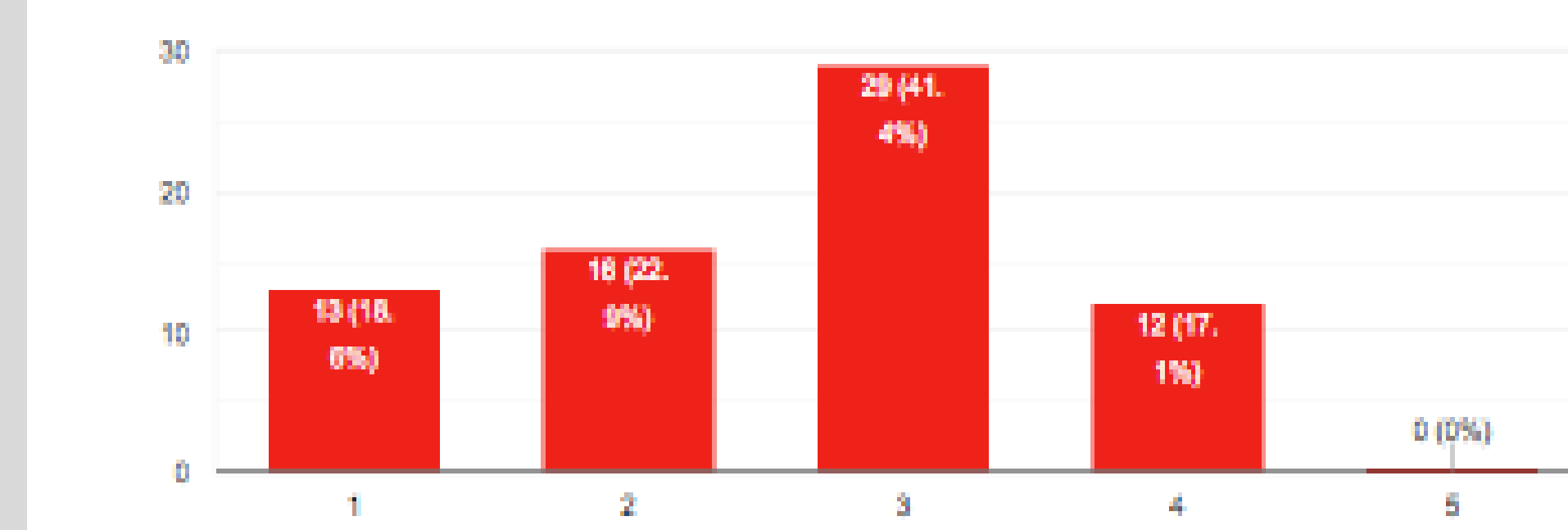
"I have never taken a planning course before so I feel a bit intimidated and stupid."

"I am only going to be living in Geneseo for the next three years, and my only connection to the community is through the college."

Figure 2

Rank your level of motivation to participate in planning efforts in Geneseo.

70 responses



"I want to help shape the community in a way that is beneficial to students."

"Can be difficult and time consuming to attend some meetings."

"There are so many levels of government and bureaucracy it feels like a lost cause."

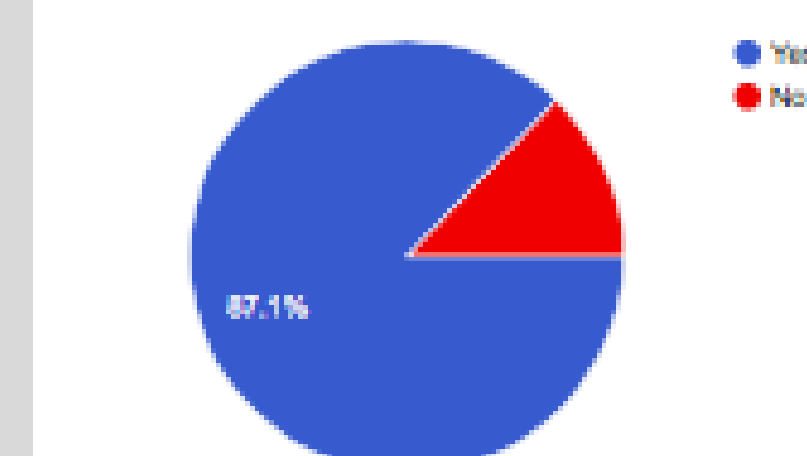
"Geneseo is great, but I won't be here forever. I want it to be great as possible while I'm here. But much after that is not relevant to me."

"I am not a permanent resident, but participating in local planning is a good contribution to the community your college is located in."

Figure 3

Are you aware that as a member of your community you can influence planning decisions?

70 responses



Do you know where and when planning meetings are conducted in your community?

70 responses

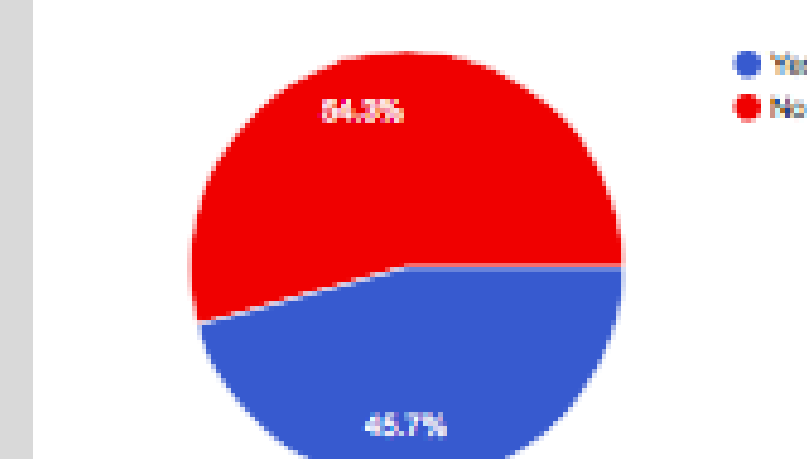
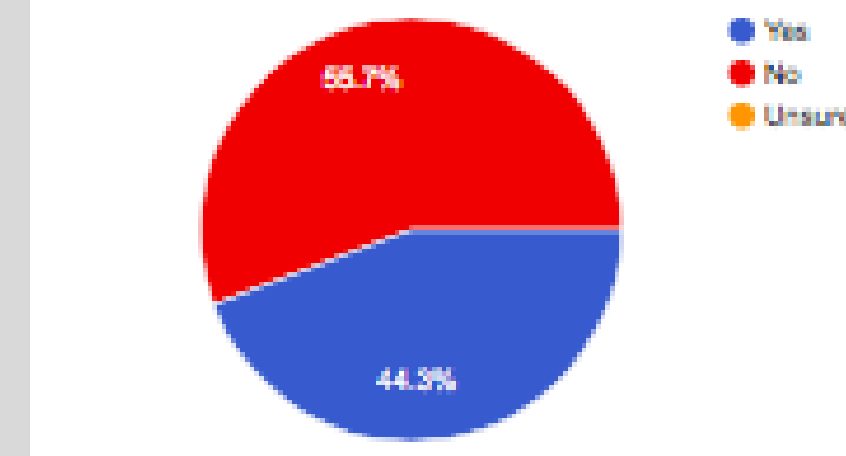


Figure 4

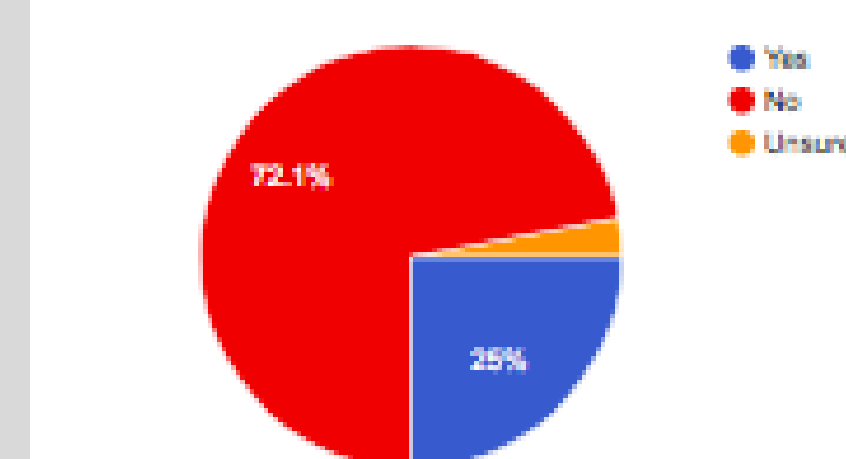
Have you ever attended a planning meeting for the Town of Geneseo, Village of Geneseo, or for Livingston County?

70 responses



If you are not from Livingston County, have you ever attended a planning meeting in your home community?

68 responses



INTERVIEW RESULTS

Some significant quotes collected during the interview process include:

"A lot of planning board meetings are really property specific and really from a transient population's perspective of no interest whatsoever." –Kurt Cylke, Village Planning Board

"Students are not fully integrated in the community, so I think it's important that they do try to be aware of what's going on. They're here for three or four years at least, and are growing as citizens so it makes a lot of sense for them to be engaged with the community." –Jim Kernan, Village Planning Board

"It is important to note that students aren't viewed as just four year residents, and that they are part of the community and that their input is valued and encouraged." –Mayor Margaret Duff, Village Board of Trustees

DATA AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This data provides valuable insight into the motivations for and dynamics of SUNY Geneseo student participation in planning. However, to create a more accurate and representative data group in future research, the group would need to be larger, and to provide a greater range of academic backgrounds among the participants. Future research could also consider the "town" side of this issue more, possibly focusing on town residents beyond the student population.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The results of this survey show some prominent trends that reflect the level and nature of public participation in planning for university students in SUNY Geneseo/Livingston County. In line with this research's hypothesis, some significant influences within this sample group on participation in planning were knowledge of where and when they could participate (**Figure 3**), knowledge of how planning affects the individual and their community, and the participant's level of motivation to be civically active in their town planning process (**Figure 2**). What resulted in more prominence that was anticipated was the impact of permanent location of residence on participants' motivation to participate in planning. A large portion of the sample group reported lack of investment in Geneseo's planning and community affairs due to the fact that it was not their long-term place of residence.

The impact of the student population's transient nature was supported by the experience and expertise of interviewees included in this research. Member's of the Geneseo Village Planning Board concurred that a barrier to students' motivation to participate in local planning processes is their temporary residence and investment in the community. Village Board Trustee Leah Fletcher supported another salient barrier noted in the survey which was accessibility, including students knowing when and where meetings are.

In light of these barriers, there are students and town actors such as Mayor Margaret Duff, who recognize the importance and value of student input in town planning. Possible avenues to improving student engagement and town-gown relations could include using new platforms to educate students in how, when, and where they can participate, or by creating more time/setting flexible forums for public participatory opportunities.

REFERENCES

- Hatcher, W. Cultivating Town and Gown Relationships for Development Success. *PATIMES: American Society for Public Administration*, Retrieved from: <https://patimes.org/cultivating-town-gown-relationships-development-success/>
- DeFilippis, J., & Saegert, S. (Eds.). (2012). *The Community Development Reader*. New York, NY: Taylor and Francis Group.