

*StudCo's Dirty Secrets
Revealed for the 1st Time!!*

The Infamous Gender Study of Student Council: December 1996: the Chris Condon Administration

*Recoil at the conversation
skills of the elected!!*

by Nathan Kleinberger

I: Introduction

Conversations with other people are part of what makes us human. Our status, who we are surrounded by, and what setting we are placed in influences how we behave in our conversations. When we participate in a "corporate setting" (i.e., an organizational meeting, administration meeting, student government, etc.), we converse in a "discussion" and become more subdued, less animated, and more polite than the way we behave in a "social setting" (amongst peers, cocktail party, recreational activity, etc.). In a "corporate setting" people are supposed to wait their turn to talk, never become emotional, and articulate themselves in discussion. When interacting in a "social setting" people lower their inhibitions, use more colloquialisms in their conversation, and candidly express their feelings on an issue.

Because the policy makers of government, and the executives of the leading American businesses inhabit the "corporate setting," this has been the traditional arena of power and influence in the United States. Children are told at a young age that to become successful in the American capitalist system, you must behave within the realm business does. The corporate setting has been traditionally a male-dominated sphere. Because of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, and the Women's Rights Movement of the 1970s, a major transformation has taken place and the balance of power has come to include both genders. Women have taken larger leadership roles in corporate arenas that were traditionally dominated by males. There are now more women CEOs, lawyers, doctors, and politicians, and two women have been appointed to the United States Supreme Court.

If gender roles are changing and traditional male arenas are now becoming more egalitarian, how does this reflect on "corporate setting" conversation? Since women are adapting to their new roles does this mean that males will dominate conversation because this is their traditional role? Will women dominate the conversation more because they are the newly empowered gender and have been repressed for too long that they feel the need to express themselves? Will men and women share equal time of conversation (or "floor dominance"), reflecting society's shift to a more egalitarian society?

II: Procedure

In this study, I examined how the "corporate model" pertains to Clark's Undergraduate Student Council. Though college is considered a traditionally more open and "free-er" environment than high school, certain students work within the corporate system to better their chances for a career after graduation. Some join fraternities and sororities, while others, specifically at private colleges, join trustee committees in hopes of earning jobs from alumni. At the small, private, liberal arts schools examined, the students joined the Student Council as a way to enter the corporate model.

Over the course of four weeks I observed and tape recorded four undergraduate student council meetings at a small, private, liberal arts university in New England which has a population of two thousand and five hundred undergraduates and around four hundred graduate students. I also attended three budget committee meetings, and a separate Council ad-hoc committee meeting to expand my corpus of data. I recorded six hours of meetings which took me about ten hours to transcribe.

The Student Council, or "Council," met once a week and meetings lasted anywhere from one hour to an hour and a half. Budget Committee meetings, which met an hour before the council meetings, also meet once a week and lasted anywhere between a half hour to forty minutes. The ad-hoc committee meeting met only once and lasted for about an hour. There are twenty-six members of council with fourteen females and twelve males. Of the twenty-six members, sixteen of them are voting members, with a four-member Executive Council. The Executive Council consists of a President, Vice-President, Treasurer, and Secretary, all of whom are male. There are also appointed positions of Judiciary Committee Chair, who is female, and a Budget Committee Chair, who is male.

III: Key Terms

In my study of council I was looking to study "floor dominance" and "turn" taking amongst males and females. Carole Edelsky defines "turn" as: "an on record 'speaking' (which can include nonverbal activities) behind which lies an intention to convey a message that is both referential and functional" (Edelsky, pg. 207). In other words, a statement made by an outside speaker that has relevance to the conversation. This should not to be confused with a "side comment." A side comment is made to only one member in a group, where a "turn" is a comment made to the entire group. In this example, council is debating whether to allocate start-up funds to S.P.O.C. (Science Fiction People of Clark). The speaker "M2" adds a turn about "allocating money" when speaking about the formation of the organization:

M2: if(h)if(h)if(h)- there's a group of people who call themselvesSPOC...[laughter]then, then if - they have no longer term organization goals that is fine, but if they don't - let's say we allocate the money and go ahead...

I also wanted to take into account the variable of how many speeches one individual has over one minute, ("Individual monologue"), the overall I amount of time one individual dominates the conversation over the rest of the group ("individual domination"), the overall amount of talk domination from one gender over the other ("overall talk"), the number of participating members of a gender in a discussion ("overall participation"), and the amount of interruptions used that prevents one person from continuing their discussion and another to continue the discussion ("interruptions").

"Discussion" also needs to be defined as open dialogue amongst the members of the group for five minutes or more. Any questions of clarification directed at one person, or interjections by the President to mediate the group were discounted. During the discussion of allocation money for SPOC a female asked the President if the organization could receive money from Council. The President's reply was discounted for analysis because the question was directed at him for clarification, rather than for purposes of discussion. Weekly reports by individual representatives were also discounted, unless the topic they were reporting on lead to some discussion. It also must be noted that of the five members of the Judiciary Committee, only the Chair is encouraged to talk during the meeting. If the other five members were encouraged to talk, the findings could have turned out a bit different.

Finally, I studied the topics of conversations and wanted to determine what topics of conversations were dominated by which gender. I lumped the thirty-three discussions studied into topics of concerning "budget issues" (any topic

concerning the allocation of money), "legislative issues" (issues that dealt with whether the topic was under Council's Jurisdiction), "social life issues" (issues related to Council's effort to improve social life on campus), and "miscellaneous issues" (any issues that did not fit in the other categories).

IV: Findings

Of the four meetings I attended, three Budget Committee meetings and one ad-hoc committee meeting, a total of thirty-three topics were discussed. Nineteen of the thirty-three issues covered were related to budget issues (57%), eight covered legislative issues (24%), five covered social life issues (5%), and only one other issue was addressed (3%). (It must be noted that majority of topics covering budget issues, relates in-part, to observation of the Budget Committee as well which covers all money matters.) Topics ranged from "start-up" fees for newly formed organizations, for which the discussion at the ad-hoc committee was based on, to the results of a survey conducted on social life on campus, to the purpose and function of the minority representative.

Of the four topic categories of discussion amongst Council during the time observed, the men overwhelmingly dominated the talk of the women twenty-four (72.7%) out of thirty-three times. The men talked more in every conversation category except one, social life issues, in which they shared the overall amount of talk with "equal amount" of talk, the designation that men and women shared an equal amount of time of discussion in the conversation. In fact, women only dominated one conversation and that was pertaining to whether Council should attend a comedy night together. In the discussion of budget, the most discussed topic, men dominated the conversation fifteen times (78.9%) of the nineteen budget issues discussed, while women only controlled the discussion during two (10.5%) out of the nineteen budget issues discussed, as well as the equal time of discussion which also controlled the discussion 10.5 % of the time.

Men also dominated the talk concerning legislative issues dominating six (75%) out of eight times, while women dominated only two (25%) of the eight times, and equal time did not control the conversation at all. The topic of social life issues had the men talking more than the women two (40%) out of the five times, with the women controlling the discussion one (20%) out of the five times, and equal time dominating 40% of the time. The one lone miscellaneous topic, addressing the validity of the Minority Representative, had the males dominating the conversation.

During the discussion there were forty-three turns taken by individual members of the group. Of the forty-three turns taken, thirty-four (79%) were done by men, while nine were taken by women (20.9%). This might have a large part to do with the fact that the men had more individual monologues than the women with nineteen of the thirty-two (59.4%), and the women only having thirteen individual monologues out of the nineteen (40.6%). One male dominated all other participants with eight individual monologues. During one of his monologues, on a discussion on allocation of start-up fees for new organizations, he had as many as three turns:

M2: I see what, u::h, everyone is saying-ya know saying- about the importance of startup fees and deciding as a group what the certain amount money- y'know across the board what the certain money should be. 1, personally, started Students Environmentally Aware - y'-

know SEA- and got three hundred dollars- was it two hundred- darn I just don't remember ... anyway (h) money is good because it supports all of campus...

With the men only dominating 59.4% of the individual monologues it would appear the men did not completely overwhelm the women in conversation. When we look, however, at the statistics of how many members participated of males and females in an individual discussion, the gap between male conversation dominance and female conversation dominance rises. Of the thirty-three discussions during the course of the study, the women never dominated the conversation more than the men. If we look at the breakdown of how many men spoke in a given conversation compared to how many women spoke during a conversation, the men dominated almost every time.

In analyzing the data, we can see the men dominate almost every conversation. We can see this in the distribution of number of speakers per conversation. Of the thirty-three conversations women only had five or more speakers contributing to one discussion, while the men, in contrast, had eleven discussions with five or more speakers. If we look at the overall talk time between the two genders, the male dominance is not as large.

The combined talk of the men came to 6 hours twenty-three minutes and three seconds, while the combined talk of the women came to 4 hours six minutes and thirty-eight seconds. The men still dominate the overall time of talk, but the disparity is not as large as the data would suggest. It is also important to remember that the women did control 40.6% of the individual monologues. The wide disparity between the substantial dominance of men controlling the discussions and the male dominance, of a lesser degree, over the individual monologues, and the overall talk time has a lot to do with the fact that two women dominated most of the conversation of the women.

During the analyses of the transcribed material, it became evident that the same two women were dominating a majority of the conversation for all the women, as opposed to five men who contributed to most of the discussion. It is also important to note that of these five men, three of them were on the Executive Council, and one of them was the Budget Committee Chairperson, all persons of power. Of the two women who spoke one was a representative and the other was the chair of the Judiciary Committee.

In this excerpt, Council is debating whether to defy the ad-hoc committee's new policy on start-up fees for new organizations. The committee agreed that only a certain amount of money can be allotted across-the-board to new organizations. Members of Council feel that the Snow Board Association should get more money than the ad-hoc committee suggested for a start-up fee. If Council decides to allocate the discussed sum to the Snow Board Association this would overrule the ad-hoc committee's policy. During this debate women actually dominated the overall time of talk, however two women contributed to the conversation, as opposed to four different men:

F1: I don't understand this logic. I mean, how can you go against the decision of the ad-hoc committee. If the committee makes a decision—some sort of decision— than you got to stick with it. The whole thought makes me just wanna— [laughter]

M1: Well, ya know, we need to be fair to all— I realize what the committee did, but we need to keep in mind if there is a genuine interest among students we need to support that

F2: Fair to all groups!! What do you think the committee did?

M2: As a member of the committee I find this whole line of discussion silly— [laughter] —I

om e a n ,
C'mon what is the point of the ad-hoc committee to meet, come to a consensus, and set policy, I mean, what we did has g o n e thrown to the toilet

F1: Here, H e r e [laughter]

F2: I agree with the toilet analogy. To give this money to the Snow Board Association is wrong! I want to be clear, extremely clear— let me clarify... We have no ill will towards you guys, it is just Council decided on a policy, it was approved and we have to stick with that... to go against the ad-hoc committee's hard work— my hard work— G:EESH... I don't know what I'd do=

M3: I, uh (h), y'know, uh (h), think we need to be consistent, but if sixty people are interested we should support that=

M1: I agree, there is an interest we should support it. Council is working hard to improve social life on campus we need to support organizations, especially new ones=

F1: Has anybody been listening what I have been saying?— I:::I am not saying we should not support new organizations, we just need to be consistent if=

M4: I agree with [F1] ... we got to be consistent. Besides they have not even had an event yet and we don't know how many people— sixty or whatever— are going to attend

During this excerpt, it is clear that the women are controlling the discussion, however more men contributed to the discussion than the women. We must ask why more women did not contribute to the discussion. In part, I believe this has to do with the interruptions by the males. When someone is interrupted it undermines their authority in speaking. Camden and Kennedy add that, "The predominant definition view is that interruptions are negative, undesirable communicative behaviors which are dysfunctional in face-to-face interaction" (Camden & Kennedy, pg. 46).

During the study, there were a total of one hundred and three cross-gender interruptions. Once again the males dominated the females by having sixty-five interruptions (63%), while the women had thirty-eight (36.8%) of the total number of interruptions. With women being the recipients of a higher number of interruptions than men, their talk was being continually undermined.

In this example, a discussion is going on regarding whether to allocate money to members of Clark Christian Fellowship to attend a conference in Michigan in December. Two men and one woman contributed to the discussion. During the course of the discussion the woman is interrupted by the two men three times, undermining her authority to contribute to the conversation to the point that she yields her speaking authority to the men:

M1: Yeah, uh, I think we should allocate the money because Clark Christian Fellowship has been an honorable organization in the past, and it goes to a good cause.

F1: How have we contributed money to them...—

M2: Yeah, I agree I have attended a few of their events and it is money well spent.

F1: How have they...—

M1: Let's bring it to a vote... O:::HH I am sorry did you [F1] have a question

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KEY:

- = spoken in fast unbroken rush
- (h) stutters or hesitates
- :: extends vowel sound of preceding letter
- M male
- F female

F 1: Never mind.

The women loses her authority to talk, nor is she allowed to even utter an entire sentence without being interrupted by the

men. In another example, during a discussion over allocating money to SPOC, the lone women in the conversation is interrupted by a male, and she interrupts back as a sign that she relents her authority over to the male speaker:

M2: if (h) if (h) if (h) -there's a group of people who call themselves SPOC— [laughter]— then, then if -they have no long term organization goals that is fine, but if they don't- let's say we allocate the money and go ahead=

F1: =Then what do we do and where does the money go—

M2: Wh:::o? =

F1: =What we have been talking about? =

M1: =SPOC—

F1: Fine.

M1: —understand?

During this conversation the women actually engages the first cross-gender interruption for purposes of clarification. She, in fact, even controls the conversation while trying to clarify "where the money goes," however, she feels her speaking authority is undermined by M1 by interrupting and, as a sign of resignation of her speaking authority, says "fine."

V. Conclusion

The undergraduate Student Council at the small, liberal arts university I observed followed a "corporate model" course Penelope Eckert suggested in her study of high schoolers outside of Chicago. Despite the push during the 1960s and 1970s for civil rights in America, based on the results of this study, men still continue to dominate women in a "corporate setting." The men controlled all but one of the four topics discussed, dominated the number of individual monologues, led the number of turns, controlled the floor, interrupted the women more than the women interrupted the men, and talked by a large majority than the women.

Though individual members would maybe never admit it, there clearly is a "glass ceiling" involved in the '96-'97 Student Council. Women control the demographics over the men, however men clearly control the positions of influence by controlling the four Executive Council positions, and the Budget Committee Chair. I have not conducted research to determine the gender breakdowns of Councils of the past, however, there is a large disparity in the one I observed. Women have come a long way in this country from the stereotypical, subservient woman of the '50's, but still have a way to go, and within a corporate setting based on this study, it clearly is a male arena with males controlling the positions of power, and dominating the talk within the group.

Student presents gender research findings

Senior Nathan Kleinberger presented his studies on gender dominance in a corporate setting, based on observations of Student Council meetings last semester. He found that "men overwhelmingly dominated" the floor 72.7 percent of the time when conversations dealt with legislative and budget issues. Only social issues were shared equally between the sexes. While the four executive positions at the time were held by men, women outnumbered men in total. After the presentation, Budget Committee Chair Rob Leeman publicly apologized.