Participatory budgeting (PB) has gained international momentum since its introduction in Porto Alegre, Brazil. Within U.S. state and local governments, we've seen the emergence of participatory budgeting and other forms of participatory governance. (Gordon, Osgood Jr., and Boden, 2017) Through these practices, research indicates positive effects via greater community engagement and innovation related to shared community challenges (Brun-Martos & Lapsley, 2017; Shybalkina & Bifulco, 2019).

Our classes are designed to challenge students to consider the role of government and the values associated with public service. As students move through our classes, we hope this exercise entices our future community members and public servants to consider the role of the public in policy design and implementation, to be open to innovative ideas for community engagement and involvement, and to be thoughtful about the significance and appropriateness of participatory governance.

Introduction / Overview:

This participatory budgeting simulation was developed for an undergraduate introduction to public administration class. It has been adopted by faculty in both face-to-face and online courses. This simple activity fosters a sense of belonging in the classroom, gets students energized about problem-solving in teams, provides insight about participatory governance, and offers a hands-on experience in budgeting and advocacy as students work to persuade others to adopt their ideas.

The objectives of the participatory budgeting simulation are:

- to encourage collaboration, relationship-building, and a sense of community among students,
- to provide students with an alternative budgeting method to incremental, performance-based, and line-item budgeting approaches,
- to motivate students to identify and think critically about needs/problems in our university community, and
- to allow students the space to develop innovative solutions to address our university's community needs/problems.

This exercise can be implemented in any number of class formats across the fields of political science, public administration, and urban planning. The contrast, for students, is more striking when it follows instruction related to traditional budgeting methods that are top-down, as opposed to budgeting decisions in which the people being served have an opportunity to shape the outcome.

Preliminary Topics:

- Traditional budgeting approaches
- Public engagement and participation
- Participatory Budgeting approaches in local government
- Communication and conflict resolution in group work

Preliminary Exercises:

Online federal budget simulation games (e.g., Bipartisan Policy Center's Balancing Act[1], iCivic's People's Pie[2], or The Fiscal Ship[3])

Steps in the Participatory Budgeting Exercise

Students are given a fictional allocation of $50,000 to solve any problem that they identify on the university campus.

Day 1. Introduction and Brainstorming

Provide a summary of top-down budgeting, then ask: How are priorities on spending different if community members decide budget priorities rather than elected bodies and bureaucrats?

Introduce the ideas behind participatory budgeting and show two short video clips by the Participatory Budgeting Project[4] that show the application. Discuss the normative objectives of participatory budgeting. Topics may include social justice, redistributive policies, and educating the public for long-term community engagement.

Students are dismissed to walk around campus and consider what our university needs in order to better serve our university community. They are also assigned an online submission to identify three campus problems/needs. The assignment is due on the night before the next class meeting. The lists are aggregated by the instructor into broader categories.[5]

Day 2. Team Formation and Proposal Development

When students return to the next class, the instructor introduces the broader categories with the specific problems/needs that fall within each. Instructors post these categories on large pieces of paper in different corners of the room. We then ask students to physically move in order to self-select the problem/need/category on which they would like to work. Once they are in their groups, they are allowed to further subdivide into smaller groups so that students can work on different problem/need areas that interest them and as a means of making group size more manageable.

Once students settle into their teams, we address common challenges to student group work.[6] Specifically, we provide brief instruction on inter-group communication, teamwork, and conflict

[1] https://us.abalancingact.com/federal-budget-simulator
[2] https://www.icivics.org/games/peoples-pie
[3] https://fiscalship.org/
[4] https://www.participatorybudgeting.org/
[5] For example, one student might add more cultural food options. Another student might include more grab and go options at the food court on their list. A third student might list a need for healthier food. These would be aggregated into an on-campus food options category.
[6] See https://www.insidehighered.com/opinion/career-advice/teaching/2023/09/13/three-ways-structure-classroom-group-work-successfully.

resolution. We let the students know that they will have an opportunity to evaluate team members to ensure accountability within the team.

Student teams begin to brainstorm viable solutions for the identified problems/needs on which they've selected to work. The team works to narrow, focus, develop, and eventually present one idea. Between classes, students are charged with conducting background research for their proposed solution. This research includes university policies, existing efforts on campus, and costs of potential projects, in order to better understand potential obstacles to policy development, budgeting, and implementation.

In the days that follow, we allocate class time for the students to meet, even if only for 15 minutes per session, to avoid issues with scheduling conflicts.

Day 3. Refining Proposals and Developing Budgets

Students meet in their teams to refine their proposals based on the results of their research. They submit a proposed budget for feedback and begin working on a presentation to share their ideas with the class.

Day 4. Organizing Presentations

Students meet in teams to organize their presentations. They also submit a three-sentence description of their project to be included on the final ballot.

We've run the team presentations in different ways, depending on the class size and class modality. We list ideas we've used below:

TIME LIMITS (Strictly enforced with a timer)
Students can be assigned a one-minute elevator speech with no question/answer follow-up.
Students can be assigned up to two minutes to present their idea, with up to two minutes to answer questions.

FORMAT:
Students organize slide presentations.
Students organize poster presentations.

Day 5. Presentation and Voting

Each group presents their idea and proposed budget to the class using slides or a poster presentation. Students then vote on their favorite projects. Each individual is allowed two votes to avoid all students simply voting for their own team. The winning idea is announced in class.

As faculty instructors, we consistently share the winning idea with university leadership through a formal letter or memorandum (Dean or above). This also models for students how senior leaders can benefit from ideas generated from those they serve.

Day 6. Reflection and Evaluation

The final assignments require student to submit a written reflection about the simulation experience and evaluate their team members using a standard form. These two assignments take place outside of class time.

List of Resources:

- Assignment Instructions
    - Brainstorm Topics
    - Short Proposal
    - Draft Budget
    - Presentation
        - Presentation Grading Criteria
    - Reflection Prompt
- Ballot (Sample)
- Evaluation Form
- Student Work (Sample)

Conclusions / Impacts:

Overall, we have found this exercise to be extremely beneficial to students for multiple reasons. One benefit is to contrast with, while also incorporating, traditional budgeting used in government. Although the process reflects a participatory format, the limit to a fictional $50,000 requires students to develop a line-item budget as part of their proposal. The exercise prompts students to consider the difference between including the population being served by the organization in the decision-making process. The priorities and outcomes may appear differently. Students learn about public budgeting and how the government informs and engages the public.

In addition, students learn how costly it can be to solve what they perceive to be small problems such as campus beautification, let alone large-scale problems such as campus parking, or student aid. They get hands-on experience researching implementation costs and developing a budget. Depending on the project, some teams also must consider how innovations would be sustained over time.

Teaching at Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs) where a substantial proportion of students are First-Gen, we find that fostering a sense of connection in the classroom has been essential. Students report that they develop lasting relationships through this group work. Many not only stay in touch outside of class during the semester, but remain in contact with one another beyond the semester.

Finally, the identification of different needs or problems on campus has helped to generate awareness for students about what their classmates may be experiencing. Certainly, some problems have included the typical frustrations with finding parking on campus or the time sink that occurs between classes while trying to get food from the food common area, but other campus-related problems that were identified early in this exercise have included the need for a food pantry or a location on campus where students who are on a fixed budget could place clothes on consignment and purchase used clothes at a discount.

References

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