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Organizations
Term Paper
05/08/99

SEAC's Crisis: An exploratory case study of aggravated underlying tensions of a student social movement organization.

1. Introduction

In April 1996 the Student Environmental Action Coalition (SEAC) had six or seven full-time employees, a national office, a monthly magazine with thousands of subscribers, a $200,000 budget, and a series of well functioning programs. In prior years SEAC had electrified the student (and non-student) environmental movement by networking over a thousand student organizations, fighting and winning campaigns, and holding one of the largest radical student conferences ever in the U.S. However within a couple months of April the organization lost its entire staff, its budget, and many of its programs were crippled. While SEAC survived the crisis, it was radically transformed in the process. This paper will explore both the immediate incident that caused SEAC's crisis and, more critically, the role of SEAC's underlying problems in causing, shaping, deepening and ultimately resolving the crisis.

What caused SEAC to go through such great turmoil in a short period of time? This paper will answer the question by showing how the crisis can be broken-up into components that are the result of tensions stemming from SEAC's organizational nature. The major components of the crisis include personality conflicts, instability, antagonized grassroots, racial tension, and a lack of money. Ultimately these are the result of SEAC's founding nature as a radical student environmental organization. I will trace the components of the crisis back to SEAC's four founding traits. To the extent that other student social movement organizations (SSMOs) share SEAC's traits, they will also share many of the same problems. Thus this theory is of interest for not only SEAC, but for many organizations.

While I shall be focussing on the negative side of SSMOs (as seen by a case study of SEAC) throughout this paper. One should not lose sight of the fact that their problems stem from choices that help as well as hurt the organization. For instance, SSMOs are likely more capable than any other organization to rapidly mobilize a constituency to take large risks (Ex. occupying a building). SSMOs can rapidly die, but they can also rapidly grow. For instance, Students for a Democratic Society started as a group of around fifty people at the Port Huron conference in 1962, quickly expanded to 100,000 members in 1968, and then in a couple years died. Beyond

issues of turnover, a lot of the instability results from a political choice to be radical and choose a structure that is compatible with the group's ideology. SSMOs, especially more radical ones, must decide when they want to stick out their neck and how far. Given that they are operating in a niche on the fringes of the 'acceptable' range of organizations, they must balance being true to their ideology and surviving so that they can continue to promote their goals.

2. Background

SEAC started when a group of students at UNC Chapel Hill 'placed a small advertisement in three issues of Greenpeace magazine', in 1988/89, because they wanted to network with other student organizations. They received over two hundred replies and organized the *Threshold* national conference for Oct. 1989, which surpassed expectations with 1700 students. The organization built upon the excitement and funding available due to the 20th anniversary of Earth Day, holding its first National Council meeting at Madison in the summer of 1990. That fall 7600 students attended *Catalyst* at University Illinois Urbana-Champaign. At that conference, students of color formed the People of Color Caucus (POCC) to address the lack of racial diversity, which directly contradicted SEAC's increasingly environmental justice oriented rhetoric. In January 1991, SEAC hired its first full time staff for $700 a month and opened a National Office in Chapel Hill, NC. At its 1991/92 peak SEAC had thirteen full-time staff members, though a year later it lost income and had only five. That fall, the national conference attracted 2500 people. In 1993 and 1994 SEAC again faced financial instability and for several months staff went without pay. Since its creation, SEAC's main programs have included *Threshold* (a national magazine sent to all members), ASEED (Action for Solidarity, Equality, Environment, and Development – an international network that SEAC created), national campaigns, national conferences, environmental justice community organizing, field organizing, training, materials distribution, regional conferences, and networking.

SEAC has a democratic structure. The principal decision-making body is the National Council. NC members are theoretically 'elected' to represent one of the seventeen regions in the U.S. SEAC also created a Coordinating Committee (CC) to cope with decisions that had to be made quickly (both emergencies and day to day management like endorsing campaigns). Half of the CC members were elected from the NC and the other half were chosen by the POCC.

In the year leading up to SEAC's crisis, the organization held another successful national conference with 2000 people coming to Chapel Hill. SEAC was generally coping, implementing programs as money (mostly grants) came in. SEAC started developing a new activist training program in the fall of 1995, holding one training then, and around ten in the following Spring. The program would sponsor weekend-long trainings at

different schools. Its goal was to build skills and develop the analysis of SEAC's members so that they could pick and win campaigns. That January, the NC meeting was cancelled due to a lack of planning and replaced by a CC one. At this meeting, SEAC had to cope with another budget shortfall and designed a plan to stave-off bankruptcy. The optimistic plan called for a 10% cut in core costs, a 50% cut in those for Threshold, increased dues (from $15 to $20), and tripling the paid membership in six months. The training program was being modified, as CC members met with the staff member, 'Toro' (Christine Santoro), to change the program. Unfortunately, their meeting was cut short.

The Coordinating Committee met again in late May. With only $10,000 in the bank and no expected grants until October, the CC unanimously voted to cut the training program. The unanimity was noteworthy, as the CC rarely agreed on anything. Their other reasons for cutting the program were to replace it with field organizing, that it did not meet the needs of the grassroots, and that components of the trainings were racist. The field-organizing program would sponsor travelling organizers who would help start new groups and bring old ones into the SEAC network. Unfortunately, when they made their decision, they were unaware that some of SEAC's grants depended upon doing the training program, and that the anti-oppression component of the training was being changed to reflect the charges of racism. Some NC members (not on the CC) and staff members argued that the training program was very effective, raised a lot of its own funding, and that it should not have been cut. Grassroots interest was obviously high as eighteen groups were interested in holding trainings in the fall. The staff was very upset by the decision as they felt the CC had intentionally excluded them from the meeting. Christine Santoro, the staff member responsible for the program, quickly resigned on June 1, citing CC incompetence. She added that this was the last straw for her: "The CC does not need to give me as an overworked, underpaid, under appreciated, under-trained staff person, extra reasons to want to resign beyond those inherent in this organization."

Two of the remaining staff took time-off to do AFL-CIO's month-long Union Summer internship, while others resigned. Increasingly temporary volunteers ran the office. Consequentially no one planned the joint Summer Training Institute (a four day activist training for upcoming SEAC leaders) and National Council meeting. So that was cancelled and replaced by another CC meeting in August. At that meeting the CC, defacto excluding others (notably the NC, but also the staff) from the process, rehashed its vision for SEAC and started to draft a proposal to modify SEAC's structure by dividing it into three loosely connected parts: SEAC, POCC, and ASEED. Also at this time the CC learnt that SEAC was not about to get any foundations grants, since upset staffers had vindictively written foundations about SEAC's crisis. Foundations were not eager to fund an

organization that appeared ready to collapse, and they postponed the grants that SEAC had expected to get in

October. The CC abolished itself and finally decided to hold a NC meeting in October.

NC member Bill Capowski bluntly summarized SEAC's state of affairs as:
    -no national staff. as in "none". all quit or have been laid off.
    -no national programs. all ended
    -no national office. closing/closed
    -no more thresholds? (done by *national* seac at least?)
    -no new leaders seac identified at national summer training institute (cancelled)
    -no grants coming in. funders liked our training program, it was cancelled.
    (Sept. 29)

At this point in time, Tides, SEAC's fiscal sponsor, stepped-in and by October made SEAC close its

national office and fire the last of its staff since SEAC had no money to pay them. Tides, wary of the damage

SEAC staff had done by writing foundations, forbade SEACers from directly contacting foundations. Tides had

become SEAC's fiscal sponsor in the early nineties, when SEAC's previous sponsor was facing bankruptcy. At

that time, SEAC had only two months to affiliate with a non-profit organization; otherwise, it would lose all of its

grants. So SEAC followed the recommendation of its previous sponsor and became a project of Tides. Tides,

who sponsored hundreds of small environmental and social justice organizations, took over supervision of

SEAC's accounting in exchange for an overhead fee.

There was plenty of vehement discussion about SEAC's crisis both over email lists and in the first six pages

(and cover) of the October *Threshold*. Many people blamed the CC since they cut the training program.

However, the discussion exploded into a long list of problems that SEAC had faced since its inception, some of

which were petty complaints, but most of which were serious substantial issues. The NC finally met in October,

for the first time since the summer of 1995. Most of the former staff wrote a letter that was read at the NC

meeting, which listed many of SEAC's problems and argued that SEAC should fold:
        As former SEAC Staff, with more than seven years collective experience with the organization,
        we believe the time has come to face the hard reality that the Student Environmental Action
        Coalition, as a national organization, needs to intentionally close its doors (Liz Gres, Helen
        Denham, Henry Moses, Christy Nordstrom, Naomi Swinton, Miya Yoshitani, and Christy
        Santoro).

At the NC meeting SEAC faced a decision between folding the organization as the staff urged, radically

transforming it according to the CC's proposal, or saving the traditional structure. The NC decided to preserve

SEAC as it had been before.

During the NC meeting, two former SEAC staff members broke into the national office and Shane

Jimmerfield posted the following disturbing message for everyone to see on the general announcement email list:

> I have been informed that early this morning Christy Santoro (toro) and Christy Rea
> Nordstrom, went to the National Office and stole all the SEAC archives.
>
> Turtle arrived just before they finished and when she asked Christy Rea what she was doing,
> she replyed, i don't think the council has been around long enough to know what to do with
> these in a responsible way, and that they would be safe at her house.
>
> This is, in my opinion, theft.
> (Oct 3. Shane Jimmerfield)

With former staff members stealing archives (which they did not return for about two years), writing nasty letters to foundations, resigning, urging SEAC to fold, and all the while SEAC going further into debt – SEAC had reached its lowest point of the crisis.

Because SEAC was facing the larger issue of whether or not it would survive, and because SEAC went through a near complete turnover in leadership, it took the NC a while to realize how serious their financial difficulties were. One such difficulty was the Risograph (a device useful for printing medium sized jobs) which was costing SEAC $550/month for a five year lease, though it lay un-used in storage for over 18 months after the office closed. Out of the October and following Jan. NC meetings, NC members wrote updates on SEAC which Tides was meant to forward to foundations. However for unknown reasons (likely plain incompetence), Tides did not forward those letters and thus SEAC had no direct communication with its main funders until Jan. 1998. At its worst point, SEAC was about $20,000 in debt. SEAC eventually got a grant that allowed it to reopen the national office and hire one person. However since SEAC was unable to get any more substantial grants over the course of a year, its finances are currently very precarious, and the one staff person is being laid off in May.

I became involved in SEAC by attending a regional conference in Pennsylvania in October 1996. While SEAC was nationally in trouble, Pennsylvania was going strong. I became increasingly involved in SEAC, spending the following summer working on the SEAC national database, and joined the National Council in January 1998. It was due to my involvement with SEAC and from having heard stories about what happened in 1996, that I became interested in doing this study.

3. Methodology

My method is to decompose the crisis into several distinct parts (*what do i do with each of the parts???*) Then I analyze the different components of the crisis and trace their cause to SEAC's founding traits of being 'radical', 'student', 'environmental', and an 'organization'. While my method is unable to prove causation, it

does strongly suggest that SEAC's founding traits are related to its organizational problems, and hypothesize that the same would be true for other SSMOs.

I collected most of my data from two SEAC email lists that are archived on the Internet. The two lists which had the most discussion about SEAC's situation were the National Council list (where NC members could post, but anyone could subscribe) and the general SEAC discussion list. Together the two lists had over four hundred pages worth of emails (though some of that is quoted in replies) discussing SEAC's crisis, SEAC's organizational problems, and related issues. The email messages provide a combination of first and second-hand accounts of what was happening with SEAC. While the messages were often very emotional and written with a lot of personal bias, they were also subject to public scrutiny and debate. A wide range of people were able to participate in the discussion, including many people who had just recently become involved in SEAC national, who thus would not be on any of the 'sides' of the conflict. The emails were written both by people with personal stakes, and by people who were just trying to understand what was happening and do what was best for SEAC. Most of my quotes come from emails or letters that were posted on email. One side product of relying on email is that many of the messages have terrible grammar and spelling. When quoting emails I try to keep it very close to the original, even at the cost of typos and a lack of capitalization, as I believe it is best to maintain the writer's style. Overall the archived emails provided a useful, personal, and very timely account of what happened.

My other sources for data were various SEAC external and internal publications. I skim-read through all of the *Thresholds* that I could find, covering most of the time from 1991 to present. I used the National Council packets (designed for NC members to get them caught-up with what SEAC was doing) from 1995 and 1998 to compare SEAC's status before and after the crisis, and for historical details about SEAC's early years. I used a couple of other files from the archives (like notes from the Jan. 1996 CC meeting), and generally learnt a lot of background through talking to SEACers and attending NC meetings myself.

4. Analysis

A. Personal Conflicts
> SEAC has a [of] way draining people, chewing them up and spitting them out when done. many
> people have been hurt through the process of growth, and the near death of SEAC.
> (Shane Jimmerfield, Feb. 12)

SEAC's crisis exposed severe personal conflicts within the organization which drove people to quit (both staff and volunteer members), often despite their great love for SEAC. People in SEAC have disagreed and

fought since the start and this is likely more common for SMOs and SSMOs. During the crisis, people expressed this in their emails and letters. The powerful accounts of aggrieved SEACers best speak for themselves.

The fact that people were so committed to SEAC, meant that both the highs and lows were intensified. As former NCC Miya Yoshitani explained, "I have seen many people, and I know that there are hundreds more, who truly dedicate themselves to the work they do through SEAC. Sleepless nights, extreme emotional highs and lows, hard learning, and sometimes large debts." (Yoshitani, Summer Camp 1995)

Christine Santoro (or "Toro"), coordinator of the Training program and the first staff member to quit, wrote the following to explain why she had resigned on June 1 after the CC cut the program:

> Revolutions do not happen over night, nor should decisions like this be decided upon overnight at 3am without the involvement of the people who will be most impacted and who on a practical level know the most about what is going on.

She felt that SEAC had moved her from optimism to pessimism, and expressed a personal (rather than structural) critique of the organization – in that in many ways her critique is targeted at individuals and groups of people rather than the structure itself. She felt a major lack of respect from the CC. Overall, she saw that SEAC was wasting her and that she had to get out:

> SEAC can be so arrogant as an organization. We talk about respect, we give lip service to the importance of true dialogue, of being a JUSTICE organization. But somehow once people receive a barely subsistent salary to work their asses of, SEAC builds a wall of stone and refuses to deal with the National office staff as human beings, and as equal partners in dialogue and decision-making. I do not enjoy being perceived as the 'other' the enemy, being talked at, being put on the defensive, feeling like I have to tiptoe around people and not be myself, and to not be thanked for the work I have done. The CC does not need to give me as an overworked, underpaid, under appreciated, undertrained staff person, extra reasons to want to resign beyond those inherent in this organization. This is not an impetuous decision, I have thought about quitting at least every week and sometimes daily. In my application for this staff position I said, "Even in the face of wanting to give up, I never fundamentally doubt what I am doing, or what I am working towards, because I truly believe in SEAC _ in what it could be as well as what it is - and in the people that make up SEAC." I have changed my mind. This has pushed my over the edge.
> (July 10)

In a later email, Bill Capowski summarized the process that leaders were undergoing, urging reconciliation:

> The Human Web...
>
> ...was torn asunder. Conflicts flared, folks raged and cried and others became silent and confused. Part of our challenge is not only figuring out an interim staff configuration, working things out with funders, figuring out how to priortize the National Office's time until we have a National Council meeting, but ALSO TAKING CARE OF EACH OTHER. There are scores of SEACers, beautiful SEACers, who are raw and bleeding inside. I think we should reach out to eachother, and help eachother through the process.
> (July 30)

Former NCC Shane Jimmerfield described the process that turns happy SEACers into burnout SEAC leaders:

> for many seac starts out as a wonderful thing. lots of love for it and hope.

then NATIONAL SEAC hits. they get sucked up out of their local group (not all come from local groups, but most do). clicks, spiraling politics, blame, secret agendas, useless hours of meetings, etc... they soon become cynical. a realization hits that seac as a national organization will not change the world--dispair. some hold onto hope longer than others, but most leave the national scene with a huge sigh of relief. no more accusations, of racism, sexism, classism, and heterosexism from people they only met once or twice
in some closed meeting, behind some thick impersonal walls. people who don't know them. people who have not taken the time to know each other, people who have taken no time to know the work that others have done, their past, the pain of life. in the sick society that has raised us all to fight each other rather than the power structure that exists in the world, we willingly give in.
(Aug. 2)

One of his principal theories was that traditionally oppressed groups/persons were misusing their status by issuing false charges to gain power within SEAC (to promote their favorite programs). He identifies the importance of resource conflicts as a source of personal tension.

In the former staff's letter to the NC urging that SEAC intentionally fold, they argued that the personal tensions and "complete lack of trust among the current organizational leadership" meant that SEAC was incapable of pulling itself out of the crisis. But as Chris Moore wrote (Oct. 17), SEAC can overcome personal problems due to the constant influx of enthusiastic members (and the old ones – often sources of the problem -- eventually leave). SEAC eventually did escape its personal conflicts, mostly because the people who did not trust each other all quit. However, losing a lot of the organizational leadership is not a healthy way of solving organizational problems, especially if leadership then becomes lacking. These quoted excerpts manage to show just a glimpse of the personal conflicts that existed within SEAC, and that could hit other similar organizations.

The intense level of personal conflicts in SEAC can be traced back to its two traits of being 'radical' and an 'organization'. Much of the personal conflict in SEAC, whether on email or at NC and CC meetings (some of which have lasted over twenty hours), was very emotional. It became emotional because for the actors involved there was a lot more at stake than having the organization decide to follow their wishes. The conflicts had to be ideological, since the actors who were struggling were very ideological and were fighting within an ideological organization. For instance the debate between whether SEAC should do a field organizing or training program, reflects the different views that SEAC should focus on expanding its base and the view that SEAC should first strengthen its existing base. It might have even been a dispute between whether SEAC should be a mass organization or a well-trained vanguard. A conflict might not start off ideological, but a dispute over a more trivial matter could bring to the open a long-lasting ideological disagreement between two or more groups as past disagreements are used to fuel the current fire. The reason that ideology is so important for SEAC is because it is a radical organization. As such members, and especially leaders, hold views that are far from the mainstream.

People who hold extreme views, tend to have them better developed, as they need to defend them more often from external criticism. Thus SEAC leaders are more likely to hold strong ideologies and bring them into play during conflict. One final difficulty is that radicalism puts a high value on refusing to compromise in the face of what an individual judges to be evil. So if conflicts within SEAC become ideological there is the chance that actors will decide to 'take a stand'.

During the 1996 crisis there was a lot of conflict, but little apparent attempts at conflict resolution. Conflicts were solved by people agreeing to disagree, and then leaving the organization. The reason for this was that SEAC did have a minimal set of formalized procedures, but since the responsibilities and privileges of most SEAC members or organizers are either not fully (or sometimes even at all) covered, or not enforced (or enforceable) -- SEAC's structure has a wide degree of informality. This informality was the result of SEAC's radical trait and its corresponding preference for a flat structure which is meant to empower the grassroots members to participate in decision-making by avoiding the evil twins of bureaucracy and hierarchy. Informality, the lack of authority, and the need for all volunteers meant that personal conflicts were allowed to develop and intensify without any organizational intervening clamping mechanisms. A more bureaucratic organization might have threatened to fire troublemakers or refer the conflict(s) to a committee for resolution, but SEAC's formalized procedures were too weak to cope with pressure of the crisis. Because of the crisis, SEAC created a conflict resolution committee to handle possible future problems. It remains to be seen whether this volunteer committee will prove capable if it is tested in the future.

Many of the personal conflicts came from SEAC's decision to be an organization rather than a loose network. During the crisis, the National Council, Coordinating Committee and the staff conflicted over what SEAC should do with its resources. The NC and CC conflicted over whom had authority to make the important decisions in SEAC. Whether it was intentional or not, the NC's power was usurped by the CC, as the NC did not meet after Aug. 1995 until Oct. 1996. The CC, whose purpose was to make emergency organizational decisions, cut the training program without any input from the NC. Thus the NC, the largest democratic body in SEAC, was effectively inactive during the worst part of the crisis. SEACers have conflicting definitions of what an emergency decision is. So each time an important issue arises in SEAC there will be some people who feel that the CC (now known as the Standing Committee) should make a decision quickly, and others who will argue that the issue can wait until the next NC meeting. This structural problem is hard to avoid in a decentralized organization. Due to SEAC's instability, there will always be the need for 'emergency' organizational decisions, and yet SEAC cannot allot emergency decision-making power without subverting its democratic principles.

The sharpest conflict between the staff and the CC during the crisis was regarding the CC's decision to cut the training program. The staff was very opposed to the decision and many of them resigned as a direct or indirect result. Some staff even stole the archives from the national office and sent letters to foundations which encouraged them to cut SEAC's funding, thus effectively sabotaging SEAC's democratic leadership. The staff had a lot of power in SEAC because of their relatively lengthy experience in SEAC, their organizational knowledge, and their ability to do SEAC work for often more than forty hours a week. SEAC often became a staff member's entire life, as it would be both their job and hobby. The national office, founded in Chapel Hill in Jan. 1991, was a power hub as all information regarding SEAC National went through it. With over five employees, the national office was easily the largest concentration of dedicated well-experienced SEACers in the U.S. Staff often had to make operational decisions, otherwise no one else would. They also had the power by the way they framed issues that were presented to the NC for 'democratic' decision-making, and even by deciding the issues that they brought-up (agenda setting power). SEAC is only able to be democratic to the extent that the staff takes a non-partisan approach and seeks to replicate the wishes of the National Council rather than its own. The NC or CC and staff did not always agree. The two democratic bodies did not have as much training, information, and experience as the staff; however, they theoretically represented the wishes of the grassroots better. A former National Council Coordinator relates one incident in which the NC decided to recklessly over-ride the better judgement of the staff, "I was once at a council meeting and we were looking at a proposal, and Adam Berrey stood up and said, 'We don't have money for this.' What happened next was quite shocking to me. The council passed it" (Shane Jimmerfield, Summer Camp 1995). In the example of the CC's decision to cut the training program, it would have been better if the staff had undemocratically over-ridden the CC's authority, as that could have avoided the crisis. As the NC met only met once or twice a year, the CC only a couple extra times beyond that, it was hard for them to effectively control such an unstable organization like SEAC. It was especially difficult when they conflicted with the power of the national office staff.

Part of the reason for the CC's decision to cut training program was to save SEAC money so that they could use it for other programs. Thus, it was a conflict over resources. Another classical resource conflict is the debate over whether SEAC was committing enough of its budget to programs promoting radical diversity (like the Environmental Justice Initiative). For resource conflict to exist, SEAC first had to make the decision to be an organization instead of a network. By forming an organization, SEAC managed to gain control over substantial resources (peaking at a staff of eleven and a $250,000 budget) by getting foundation grants to implement its programs. However, in moving from a resource-poor network to an organization which could actually afford staff and programs, SEAC became a place where people could play out their desires to change the world through

implementing their pet activist project and/or getting a job. Since SEAC never had enough money, leaders often came into conflict over what would be the best programs and, due to its high leadership turnover, SEAC was constantly reprioritizing its goals. The importance of resource and organizational sources of the conflict can be seen by looking at how SEAC has operated after the crisis. Since the crisis, SEAC has been operating with between five and fifteen percent of its previous income. Consequently, resource expenditure is less an issue as most people agree that SEAC should prioritize paying rent, phone, mail, the one employee's salary and other similar basic costs. Now that SEAC has so little money, time is a more important resource and since most time comes from volunteers, it is ineffectual to have a power struggle over how others should spend their time. As SEAC has lost resources, it has become more of a network and less of an organization. Resource-centered conflicts have now moved into the petty areas of deciding how to spend several hundred (or a thousand) dollars, rather than tens of thousands of dollars in previous years. The level of conflict has diminished along with the reduced size of the amounts.

B. Antagonized Grassroots

SEAC's crisis exposed the gap between SEAC National and the local groups (or between the leaders and the members). During the crisis, most of the leadership eventually realized that SEAC was in dire straits; however, the number of people who were involved in the higher-level decision making determining SEAC's future was relatively small. Most of the regular members either did not know something was happening (most likely), or even if they had some idea, they did not know what to do nor were they being asked to help. If SEAC had more people competing for positions of national leadership, then the elected leaders would be better and be more accountable in their decision making. Also with more people involved as volunteers at the national level, the organization would have a greater ability to operate without financial resources and thus better survive a loss in funding (like that in 1996).

The reasons that there is a gap between SEAC National and the members include high turnover, bureaucratic rules and long meetings, poorly implemented caucuses, and the push for an off-campus focus. SEAC has high turnover because it is a *student* organization. Most people are only college students for a short period of time. So most of SEAC's membership has a very high turnover; however, the leadership is more immune to it as they may have first joined in high school and can stay involved for several years after they graduate. Thus, there is a dichotomy between the experience of the leadership and the lack of experience of the grassroots. This difference is paralleled in the political gap as the leadership is significantly more radical than the members.

Most *organizations*, especially once they achieve a minimum size, must formalize at least some of their rules (even if only due to externally imposed requirements of foundations, governments, and other institutions). SEAC created an official document 'Policies and Guidelines' which includes the organizational mission statement and rules that govern its operation (membership, regions, organizational roles, etc). The entire document is eight long pages and often some of the minor details that it contains become important (particularly at national council meetings). Therefore, to the extent that very few people know its contents very well, and because the rules are constantly under review, it is a source of frustration especially for people who are by nature anarchist (or against 'The System'). It is hard for activists to see the connection and immediate (or even future benefit), especially in the heat of a meeting, to modifying SEAC's policies and guidelines, and achieving environmental justice. The existence of formalized rules widens the gap between leaders who know the rules, and the grassroots who may not even know about their existence, or where to find them.

SEAC once had a National Council meeting that lasted 27 hours. Such long meetings are a tradition in radical groups who tend to favor mass participation in decision-making. The problem with letting everyone express their opinion is that many people cannot handle extremely long meetings and consequently SEAC repulses them. It is unlikely that a new person who attends a National Council meeting that lasts until 2 AM is going to want to return, unless there are other powerful factors at work

SEAC has a caucus system whose purpose is to empower people of color, women, and queers. Anti-oppression training is central to SEAC's mission due to SEAC's consciousness of the dangers of racism, sexism and heterosexism that comes from its radicalism. Unfortunately, caucuses are often poorly implemented. In such cases students (most commonly in the majority group and more moderate students) do not understand why caucuses exist and/or resist discussion that they are sexist/racist/homophobic and responsible for actively working against oppression. Particularly regional caucuses, which is where most people meet them for the first time, appear to be (and are) imposed by an authoritarian SEAC National upon the grassroots.

One gap between national and local comes from the some leaders desire to concentrate more on organizing communities than students. This is the result of SEAC's move from traditional environmentalism to an environmental justice perspective. As an example of this move, in Jan. 1992 the NC passed a resolution recommending that groups spend "at least 50%" of their time in "equitable, principled, community organizing." The ideal type environmental justice struggle is a campaign against a corporation that is dumping and/or incinerating toxic materials in a disproportionately people of color area whose residents are politically and economically disempowered. It is possible to do EJ organizing on campus (for instance on international issues like working for university divestment from companies who are investing in Burma), however the general push is

to ally the campus group with a community organization. In the case of SEAC's Environmental Justice Initiative program (EJI), SEAC's move into EJ community organizing could be perceived by local groups as taking away resources that should have been devoted to building a campus network. Members might see this as another case of SEAC National not serving the needs of its members.

Racial Tension

   Racial tension has been causing SEAC problems since very early on in the organization's history. In 1996 crisis, racial tension came into play as opponents of the training program argued that components of it were 'racist'. Due to the high level of racial tension in SEAC and its anti-racist ideology, this was a very serious charge (albeit an incorrect one as it came from a misunderstanding of a part of the program). SEAC's problem with racial issues came from being a radical environmental organization.

   Since the Sixties, identity politics has grown stronger than traditional class-based or multi-issue activism, particularly in the case of students. The women's, black power, Chicano/a, gay liberation and other movements have transformed the activist terrain. Now SMOs and SSMOs must pay attention to not only external, but also internal issues of diversity and oppression.   Radical organizations face the largest challenge.   Many radicals have decided that operating as a minority in an organization was unacceptable, and split away to form their own organizations where they would be in the majority and safe from internal organizational oppression. Especially in regards with race, since many people of color (POC) are in POC organizations, the remaining traditionally white organizations find diversity even more unachievable at the same time that they finally realize how important it is.

   Because of the emergence of identity politics and struggles to recognize internal oppression (and demands of the traditionally oppressed groups), SEAC implemented a caucus system for people of color, wimmin, and queers. Members of any of these groups are able to interrupt a regional conference, National Council meeting, or Summer Training Institute by calling a caucus for as long as they feel they need to discuss whatever they want. While the caucus meets, an alternative group gathers to discuss how they can use their position of privilege to end the oppression. Not only can individuals call caucuses, but also they are regularly scheduled for most regional and national events. The caucus system effectively empowers traditionally oppressed groups, though when poorly implemented can negate their purpose.

   White people have dominated the environmental movement, more so than many other movements, and SEAC is no exception. Students of color at SEAC's 1990 national conference (Catalyst) formed the People of Color Caucus (POCC), in response to the lack of diversity and the contrast between the leadership's rhetoric and

what was happening. Over the following years the POCC was given representation on the National Council, with eventually half of the seats being reserved for people of color. In addition, the NC designated some funds for POCC programs, notably the Environmental Justice Initiative (EJI) which arranged internships for young people in environmental justice organizations. SEAC had regular caucuses and started a white anti-racist program (WARP) to tackle racism. Anti-oppression was integrated into SEAC's activities and analysis, including conferences, trainings, and publications.

People of color often charged that SEAC was not fulfilling its commitment to becoming a racially diverse organization. They argued that SEAC had promised to implement programs that never happened. As an example of the emphasis that SEAC National placed on issues of race, at the Jan. 1994 NC meeting the top two vote getting programs were the EJI and the WARP. However, the WARP never got its act together as people did not make it a priority. A staff report on the WARP in 1996 listed its shortcomings: "MINIMAL STAFF TIME... NO SIGNIFICANT RESOURCES... NO CLEAR PLAN..." (capital letters in the original). Another example of a failed goal was the attempt to have one third people of color at the last national conference in Chapel Hill (they would be lucky to get much more than 10%). SEAC's membership was still very white (and internal racism existed – though likely at a much lesser scale than general society), and there was constant discussion by the POCC about their relationship with the rest of SEAC. The POCC also wondered whether POC should work from within SEAC or leave.

On the other hand, the POC in SEAC often were recruited from outside the organization (in an attempt to diversify) and often did not represent the base members. Some of the efforts to diversify SEAC, through affirmative action, could be perceived (as some likely were) as tokenism. People were being recruited and put into positions of leadership because of their race and because SEAC had this idea that half its leadership should be people of color, rather then because they were the best qualified person. The implementation of affirmative action was done by a quota system, which might solve the numbers problem, but has significant negative side effects. POC charged that SEAC was using them as window-dressing to get more resources from foundations.

Some white people (and the organization in general) reacted to the discussion by adopting 'white guilt'. They privileged the views of POC and agreed with them based on the race of their presenter, without adequate consideration as to whether that person represented just themself or if like views were shared by many other POC. For several years, the half of the NC seats that were reserved for the POCC were just filled by whomever could attend the meeting, instead of being elected. The POC in SEAC were often more radical than regular SEACers. Thus, they were more likely to recognize or charge that institutional racism existed within the

organization (Ex. the white folk music which predominates at conferences), whereas white SEACers might only recognize blatant racism

Not only was there conflict between POC and whites, but there was also an intra-POCC conflict between students who felt more attachment to SEAC and those who felt that SEAC was shafting them. There was also a conflict between white SEACers who strongly supported affirmative action, and those who were opposed to the policy because of the quotas.

In the Coordinating Committee notes from Jan. 1996, the POCC was debating whether to stay within SEAC. However, their commitment to the organization was shown by the ongoing EJI and their work on an Environmental Justice Organizing Guide that was nearing completion.

During SEAC's crisis a lot of people left the organization, and a lot of those were people of color who left partially because of the crisis, but also some of them decided they were better off working in POC organizations. SEAC's EJI, which had difficulties tying itself in with SEAC in the first place, was spawned off into a separate organization, Youth United for Community Action, which continued to prosper. Whereas the white SEAC leadership managed to build itself back up, the POCC has remained for all practical matters completely dysfunctional ever since. And whereas there was once racial equality (50/50) at SEAC NC meetings, it became as divided as 90/10 and SEAC is currently unable to meet any of its ambitious racial diversity quotas. Since SEAC is just trying to survive, it has not laid as much emphasis on diversity. As it has fewer resources and the POCC is much smaller (to non-existent), there is no longer a debate over whether SEAC should be giving half, or at least a very sizable chunk, of its resources to POC friendly programs.

SEAC started off as a traditional environmental organization, but rapidly jumped onto the environmental justice (EJ) boat years before many other environmental groups did. Environmental Justice emerged as people recognized the failings of the traditional environmental movement to address issues of race and class. Many activists felt that environmental organizations were not focussing enough (or even any) attention on the type of communities that were 'getting dumped on' with super fund sites, incinerators, landfills, and pollution. The traditional environmental movement was criticized for being led by members of the privileged white middle class. Social scientists did studies that showed that race was one of the most significant factors in deciding where toxins would be dumped, and thus 'environmental racism' was born. SEAC, mostly due to its radical nature, agreed with this critique and decided to become an EJ organization. SEAC faces the problem of trying to recruit POC to diversify the organization by presenting itself as an EJ organization, while simultaneously having to defend its EJ claim as the diversification has failed.

It was one thing for most of SEAC's leadership to make the leap and realize the connections between the physical, cultural, political and economic spheres. Unfortunately, much of the membership and chapters continued to work on regular environmental issues, with recycling and forest protection ranking very highly. While the mainstream environmental movement has increasingly picked-up and incorporated EJ into its campaigns, most student environmentalists start off with very limited notions of the environment since EJ is not so mainstream that one would learn about it in the regular media. As students take their first steps and become active, they feel a desire to 'save the planet' and often coming from moderate backgrounds, they do not recognize the need for overarching change and connections that SEAC espouses. This problem shows itself in a combination of racial and ideological tensions both at the national level, and between SEAC National and the grassroots.

C. Lack of Money

After SEAC's crisis, it became very apparent how much the organization had been depending on foundation support for its income. For without that support, SEAC had to fire its remaining staff and close the national office. Funding problems also helped to provoke the canceling of the training program, which started the crisis rolling. The reasons that SEAC did not have substantial non-foundation income are its radicalism and student constituency.

Since SEAC is a radical organization, it follows that it is likely to be influenced by the desire for autonomy, which is a typical value of the New Left. The New Left values liberation of oppressed groups. Students are mildly oppressed due to their age, dependence on parents, transitory status, and low income. One infamous New Left group, SDS (Students for a Democratic Society), started as a student wing of the League for Industrial Democracy, but conflicted with and separated from its parent. The first thing emphasized in SEAC's mission statement is that 'SEAC is a *student-run* and *student-led*...'" (italics added). Thus SEAC eschews ties with any parent organization that would be able to provide it with important resources (information, people, money, office-space, etc) and stability, as SEAC fears becoming dependent.

SEAC's constituency overwhelmingly consists of students. Students are generally in debt, and are either poor or claim to be. For its entire existence, SEAC has been unable to raise adequate income from membership dues. National conferences have been more successful since people are obligated to pay to register (and get housing). Consequentially SEAC has traditionally relied upon foundation grants for 90% of its funding. As early as 1992, after a $60,000 budget cut, SEAC was trying to find alternative sources of income:

> Foundation grants are an addictive drug that the organization becomes dependent on; when they become unavailable, SEAC goes into withdrawal. We must become financially

independent enough that SEAC will survive even if foundation grants are removed entirely. As of now, we are far from that point (Feb/Mar 1992, *Threshold*).

In the summer of 1993, the NC agreed to "raising nearly half the budget from sources other than foundations" (Oct. 1993 Threshold) but failed to do it. The logic of foundation funding requires that one or two people, traditionally office employees, exert tremendous power since by their communication with foundations they shape SEAC both at the margin and on a larger level. Since SEAC cannot fund its own projects, it must stay within the bounds of 'what is fundable'. While there is a wide-range of foundations and SEAC does not have to follow the goals of any one foundation, most environmental foundations are more conservative than SEAC – so their impact risks affecting SEAC's priorities. While there are a few radical foundations (Ex. Resist), they tend to be poor and provide grants of thousands of dollars, instead of tens of thousands. Perhaps the greatest danger is that foundations can either shift their priorities or decide to change what is the best means to a common goal. Thus a $40,000 grant that may have come in regularly for three or more years, upon which SEAC was beginning to rely for one or more staff positions (or programs), might suddenly dry-up without much of an explanation. As SSMOs are liable to operate with very little to no cash reserves, one grant refusal can mean that the organization is unable to meet payroll until it has another good chance at another grant. Finally, foundations want to give organizations 'seed' money for a short-term period, hoping that they will eventually become independently funded. SEAC is far from reaching this point.

D. Instability

SEAC is a historical anomaly. what we did in creating SEAC was amazing. SEAC was more fragile that most had anticipated and now we find it in this condition.
(Shane Jimmerfield, Feb. 12)

Personal conflicts, antagonized grassroots, racial tension, and a lack of money all made (and still make) SEAC unstable. In addition, it is highly probable that other SSMOs would follow similar patterns as SEAC and thus experience great instability. The personal conflicts increase member and more significantly leadership turnover and thus instability. The wide gap between SEAC National and the grassroots in a constant source of tension, and since it discourages member-involvement SEAC faces vast difficulty in being either a representative or a participatory democracy. In addition, the antagonism reduces the number of people involved in SEAC National, producing a leadership shortage in SEAC. SEAC is unable to fill and complete the work of various volunteer committees that run the organization, especially now that many tasks are not the staff's responsibility due to the lack of staff. Racial tension encourages both races to quit SEAC. People of color often decide that they would be better off in a more diverse (or POC majority) organization. White people might feel that a small

number of POC are getting a disproportionate amount of resources and not appreciate charges of racism, whether they are accurate or not. Finally SEAC's lack of grassroots income and its correlated dependence on foundations, subjugate it to the whims of the foundation funding process and make it hard to plan programs in advance. Leaders can write strategic plans for SEAC, but there is little chance that they can carry them out.

One of the most critical causes of instability is the high turnover that is a direct result of SEAC's student constituency. While there are ways to attenuate the turnover and the problems that it causes, SEAC must unavoidably deal with a rapid influx and outflow of members. The turnover of the leadership is even greater since they might not feel experienced enough to get highly involved until their last two years of college. Therefore, SEAC works with approximately a four-year window (with some exceptions for people who get involved in high school, or who stay involved through graduate school). Maintaining SEAC's base is complicated as students transfer, do 'a year abroad', dropout (more likely for activists), change issues, and burnout. In addition, students tend to change their school address each year, and it is both inconvenient to get in touch with them via their home address and difficult to get it in the first place. Most students do not have a strong enough connection to SEAC that they feel the need to stay in contact with the organization, so most often the effort must be made from SEAC's end.

SEAC groups also have very high turnover. It is not uncommon for the leadership (or one essential leader) to graduate without recruiting new members and for their group to die. For example, even the SEAC group that once organized the 7600 student national conference at Urbana-Champaign declined to the point of inactivity. Many groups face annual turnover rates of over 50%. Thus if they once had a strong connection to SEAC, but a year or two passes, it is highly probable that they will forget about it.

For SEAC to build an organizational identity in its constituents and be a grassroots democratic organization, it must contact members and member groups several times a year. Otherwise there is a strong tendency for student groups to spend all their energy on their own project, and forget about the existence of the larger network. SEAC must continually be educated a new batch of students about the same issues, teaching the same skills, and very often repeating the same mistakes.

Students are more likely to go through big surges of activity and then burn out. While this is true for activists in general, it is worse for students since they have less external obligations (and are able to shirk those that they do have, often without much cost), and thus more able to mount intense last-minute organizing campaigns. Finally students have less experience dealing with balancing workload and activism, and have often not developed strategies for reducing burnout and maintaining their personal sanity. Many SEACers burnout and the 1996 crisis was an excellent example.

Another major cause of SEAC's instability is its inability to do strategic planning. Former National Council Chair and staff member Miya Yoshitani remarked in 1995 that SEAC had been in a "constant identity crisis since 1989" (Summer Camp). And that while many SEACers were active, 'if you ask everyone where they are going, they will probably all give you different answers"(Summer Camp). She felt that SEAC concentrated too much on avoiding short-term crises, whereas it should also be planning to avoid crises before they occur. Though due to the high turnover in leadership, there is little motivation for leaders to think beyond the short term.

5. Alternative Theories

There are several alternative theories that help explain what happened to SEAC during the 1996 crisis and post-crisis period. I will address them as they are helpful, but one should not be sidetracked past the purpose of this paper to show how the crisis was affected by SEAC's nature as a radical student environmental organization.

One common theory to explain crisis in social movement organizations (SMOs) is that the goals of SMOs are co-opted due to the influence of powerful institutions. SMOs must trade-off holding on to their radical goals, and compromising their goals (and thus increasing conflict between the leaders and members) in exchange for lessened opposition. Generally, some level of compromise is necessary for survival. This theory does not explain SEAC's problems, since the leaders were more radical than the members, and leadership compromise brought the organization closer in line with the members' ideology. The moderating influence of foundations put some limit on SEAC's programs, but more so in size than in content. SEAC was still able to sponsor the programs that it wanted.

Almost all organizations face competition, and if an organization cannot compete, then it will eventually die. SEAC faces competition for members from Free The Planet, the Student Sierra Club, the Public Interest Research Groups (PIRGs), and several smaller organizations. In addition, SEAC has to compete with other groups for funding. In particular SEAC is at a disadvantage in competing for the money of more radical foundations, since when compared to people of color environmental justice organizations, SEAC's lack of diversity decreased its credibility. However, competition was not a critical problem for SEAC until after the 1996 crisis. After the crisis the foundations were able to stop funding SEAC, because they could transfer their funding to other organizations that appeared healthier than SEAC.

One such competing organization which hurt SEAC was Free the Planet. At the January 1995 NC meeting, SEAC debated whether to endorse a national conference (Free The Planet) that PIRGs (Public Research Interest Groups) and the Green Corps were organizing as a response to the newly majority Republicans' "Contract for America". SEACers were concerned that the two organizations had traditionally exploited SEAC members by

using them as fundraisers and imposing campaigns from the top-down, that the organizers were not young, and that organizers had falsely claimed that SEAC had endorsed the conference. In fact, the initial mailing was sent to "everyone in the back of *Threshold* except the CC members". Eighteen hundred people attended the conference. Some SEACers stole part of the show by temporarily taking over the stage and organizing a large unscheduled environmental justice protest.

The conference organizers then used the contacts they got from the conference (many of whom were SEACers or came due to SEAC outreach) to launch a national student environmental organization in direct competition with SEAC. In Feb. 1997 after SEAC had just gone through the worst part of its crisis, SEACers found out that leaders of Free The Planet had been spreading rumors that SEAC is dead, serving the joint purpose of building their membership, and winning grants from foundations that had previously gone to SEAC. For these above and other reasons, the SEAC leadership that had related to the FTP leadership, strongly wishes that FTP would die. The feeling is likely mutual, except for the membership which does not understand why we 'cannot just all get along'. Recently the two organizations agreed to a truce, of questionable functionality, where in exchange for an end to the 'SEAC is dead' rumors, SEACers are meant to stop bad-mouthing FTP.

The crazy staff and leadership theory implies that either activists are not by nature normal people and that this was particularly true in the case of SEAC, or that because of the massive stress placed on individuals they are driven to act crazy. While the pressures on the SEAC office staff were un-doubtfully great, there is good evidence to believe that they were a little abnormal, as acts like writing letters to foundations to cut-off SEAC's funding, stealing office files (and not returning them until two years later), and major personal conflicts would lead one to think.

Another external factor that played an unknown sized effect on SEAC's crisis was the post-1990 decline as initial the excitement of the twentieth Earth Day wore off. Many of the environmental groups in SEAC were founded around 1990, subsequently went into decline and even folded, and the movement never returned to its original strength. Perhaps even more significantly, SEAC lost the initial burst of excitement that occurs with any new movement and had its founders believing that they were the start of something incredible. Once an organization has been in existence for several years, and stopped growing, it loses much of the enthusiasm that kept it growing. As SEAC lost its luster, it found it harder to get funding and it is currently at the point where foundations are refusing to fund SEAC (though much of this is due to the crisis itself).

A final theory was the impact of SEAC's fiscal sponsor: Tides. In exchange for managing some of SEAC's finances, letting SEAC use their non-profit status, supposedly promoting SEAC to possible funders, and allowing SEAC to go into debt, Tides gets a portion of SEAC's grant money (currently 9%). One commonly shared

theory is that Tides 'screwed SEAC' by not helping SEAC get grants, by blatant misbehavior in not forwarding letters that were written for foundations to explain SEAC's crisis, and by demanding that we devote too much of our income to debt repayment thus paralyzing the organization.

6. Conclusion

It is clear that both social movement organizations and student organizations have different characteristics than their for-profit and adult-run counterparts. By examining SEAC's crisis, I have shall extract findings of greater significance, of specific applicability to student social movement organizations (SSMOs), and to a lesser extent to SMOs (student movement organizations) and student organizations. SEAC's crisis exposes clear organizational problems that contribute to its continual instability. While some of the issues raised are SEAC-specific, it is likely that most of them will reappear in a similar form in similar organizations. This work will be useful to anyone studying, interested in forming, or concerned about maintaining a national or large progressive student organization. Whether it be the old or a new SDS (or other multi-issue organization), a paradigm based organization (peace, environment), an issued based one (free Burma, socially responsible investment, anti-sweatshops), an identity based one (queer, race/ethnicity, women's) – I believe that all will struggle with similar issues that are typical of SSMOs. All students organizations will have to cope with high turnover – what impact does this have on their organization and its structure? SSMOs must deal with the advent of identity politics and thus incorporate a multi anti-oppression focus into their analysis (sexism, racism, heterosexism, classism, etc). They must do so even if those issues appear secondary to its goals, or face the consequences of failing to be diverse. Are SSMOs (and SMOs) more affected by personal conflicts and/or burnout? I believe that SSMOs will face the same challenges as SEAC, to the same extent that they are also radical, student-run and composed, and try to establish themselves as a formal organization.

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