



## Models of Student Government Associations

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Submission Date: 17 Dec. 2021 | Published Date: 07 Feb. 2022

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### Abstract

Higher education institutions make use of many shared governance bodies, including those that involve students. These bodies are designed to be representative of the larger student population, yet little is known or understood about the types of representative bodies that are in use on college campuses. The purpose for conducting the study was to profile the structure of student governments based on representative apportionment. Document identification and analysis allowed for the identification of how student governments are structured on various college campuses. A total of nine different organizational structures were identified as being currently used on college campuses, ranging from lotteries of governments where students are chosen at random to the very common apportionment based on academic majors, faculties, and colleges.

Colleges and universities have a broad array of structures to choose from when designing appropriate shared governance systems and need to critically define their expectations for shared governance before finalizing a method of student voting apportionment.

**Keywords:** Student Governance, Higher Education, Shared Governance, Organizational Design, Student Involvement

## INTRODUCTION

The American model of college student government has evolved into its current form primarily during the past 50 years <sup>[12]</sup>. Student governments were somewhat controversial, as administrators and faculty resisted engaging students in the process of institutional governance. The academic freedom movement and activism of the 1960s and 1970s gave rise to a new appreciation and acceptance of student government bodies and this time period has become seen as a defining era for student rights. In particular, many student governments were provided access to both campus administration and even began electing students to serve on governing boards <sup>[4]</sup>. The initial models of student government ranged broadly from elections directly from the student body without defining a constituency to narrowly defined constituencies based on residential living or academic major.

Student governments have grown and evolved and are typically considered to play an important role on their campuses <sup>[3]</sup>. These governance bodies provide an outlet for students to voice their concerns and address issues relevant to the entire student body, and they also provide important leadership development opportunities for students <sup>[1]</sup>. Through the process of holding elections, debates, passing resolutions and legislation, and allocating student fee money, the student government body helps students learn about the complexities and importance of participating in democratic communities. Key skills in negotiating differences and structuring work are also learned by participating in these bodies, and those working in student development have particularly recognized the value of student government participation <sup>[2, 1]</sup>.

Student government leaders, much like their faculty senate colleagues, do not always function efficiently and their decisions are not always tightly coupled with institutional decision-making. A recent study also identified that there is not a great deal of congruence between what student, faculty, and staff senates tend to talk about during a given academic year<sup>[9]</sup>.

Despite a growing body of literature on college student governance, there is little known about what exists and works best in terms of student governance structures, processes, and oversight. Therefore, the purpose for conducting the current study was to profile the structure of student governments that are either in or could be in use on American college campuses.

## The State of Student Government

Student governments have been evolving for half a century<sup>[5]</sup>. Driven largely by the end of *in loco parentis*, institutions found ways to engage students in meaningful conversations about how to best structure curricula, services, and experiences to meet their needs. The result on many campuses in the early-1970s was the formation of formal governance bodies typically uniquely structured for the institution in which they were serving<sup>[4]</sup>. This meant that within a state system of higher education, for example, there might be a variety of governance structures in place to represent student voices. Some of these were structured around living areas or class status, and others were structured around academic disciplines.

Student governance emerged from an era of student unrest only to develop into a structure on some campuses that reflected political machines, driven by coordinated student groups. The University of Alabama famously had their student government profiled, suggesting that their structure was run by a very few individuals pulling strings and making decisions for the entire body<sup>[14]</sup>.

Alabama reformed their student government, and other institutions followed suit to provide a structure that better reflected the student population<sup>[10]</sup>. The general model mirrored public political structures with judicial, executive, and legislative branches, and although slowly adopted, most ultimately developed election laws that prohibited extensive spending or other methods of undue influence. Opportunities for political-machine like behavior have continued to exist on some campuses, with organizations such as social Greek-letter chapters providing a strong constituency to influence election outcomes. These bodies on some campuses have essentially become voting blocs that can control election outcomes for multiple years in a row, and consequently, determine what types of agendas these governments embrace.

Aside from the agendas that these student government political parties create, institutional leadership can also rely on these governing bodies as an important vehicle to understand student concerns and issues<sup>[6, 11]</sup>. Many institutions provide meetings between student governments and senior institutional officials, such as presidents, chancellors, or vice presidents for student affairs, to understand what students are thinking about and what concerns them.

A different level of importance is also placed on student governments as a strategic element within the concept of 'broad based inclusive decision-making'<sup>[8]</sup>. Most regional accrediting bodies require institutions to have a strategy that includes multiple voices, especially faculty, in the decision-making process. For many institutions, however, student government plays a similarly important role and student leaders from these bodies participate alongside their faculty and staff peers in providing input to the decision-making process.

Despite the important role that student government can play, many governments experience low voter turnouts. Although nearly a decade old, Miller, Miles, and Nadler (2012) found an average voter turnout of 17% for doctoral institutions and 13% for comprehensive universities. The highest student voter turnout in elections were identified in private comprehensive institutions (22%) and private doctoral institutions (20%) followed by public doctoral institutions (16%) and public comprehensive universities (11%). These percentage voter turnouts, however, can be somewhat misleading, as they also reported the range of student voter turnout at public doctoral institutions as ranging from almost 54% of the eligible student voting population to 3% of eligible voters. Similarly, at private comprehensive universities, the range of eligible voter turnout was 9% to 52%.

## Issues Impacting Student Government Actions

Student governments by design are intended to reflect the voices of students. These organizations typically have a pre-determined range of actions in addition to any sort of agenda that the student government leaders might develop, and these actions are often framed initially around the disbursement of student fee monies. Through the collection of student fees, funds are provided to an oversight body such as the student government to award to student organizations or initiatives for the welfare of the student body. This disbursement activity can be a major element of the student government's ability to exercise power on a campus, and can also be a major time commitment for the organization<sup>[13]</sup>.

Aside from fund disbursement, there is little consistency across student government actions on college campuses. Many student government elections allow for individuals or constructed political parties or alliances to develop platforms or agendas of possible work initiatives, meaning that often a political agenda shifts from year-to-year without longitudinal execution or impact.

Student governments also actively engage in their own self-management, spending time on assuring proper member commitment, filling vacated seats, and managing elections or appointment processes. Governments also use their time to recognize individuals who have made a commitment to campus or the organization with resolutions of recognition or gratitude <sup>[9]</sup>.

The lack of consistency across campuses illustrates the flexibility that student governments possess in deciding what goals and actions to undertake. Student government leaders subsequently have a broad ability to determine what is important for a government to take on for action, and the extent to which this action is visible throughout the campus and to other decision-making bodies.

The concept that a student government agenda is linked to other campus decision-making bodies has been referred to as “agenda alignment.” The primary adjacent governing bodies would typically include a faculty senate and staff senate, in addition to the senior campus leadership. Despite common interests and the ultimate welfare of the campus community, research has indicated that the dominant decision-making bodies tend to operate individually with little consideration for what the other body’s agenda is comprised of <sup>[9]</sup>.

## DATA

As an exploratory, descriptive narrative, the current study sought to describe how colleges and universities structure or could structure their student government associations. Data were sought from a variety of sources, including personal consultations with student government advisors, internet searches of student government and college and university websites, and referrals from current and former student government participants. Data were collected over the spring, summer, and early fall of 2021.

## Findings

Through both the identification of types of senates found online and those mentioned by survey respondents, 9 different senate structures were identified. These structures were specifically for the legislative section of student governments, with attention not given to whether or not these were unicameral or bicameral structures. The focus was on attempting to identify how students got involved and who they represented in their constituencies.

1. *Lotteries.* These student governments are comprised on individual students, typically but not necessarily full-time, whose names are selected at random in a lottery. The administration of the lottery can vary from any student name to students submitting their name for consideration and then drawing names at random to fill a senate. In some instances these lotteries will be administered by the student government or its leaders, and in others, the lotteries will be conducted by student affairs administrators.
2. *Club Based.* In these governance units, representatives are elected or appointed from various registered student organizations. There might be a set of representatives from athletic organizations, a set from academic societies, and a set from philanthropic or social organizations. One example of this type of organization is Dona Ana Community College in New Mexico.
3. *Class Based.* Historically, many private colleges and universities have organized activities around class years, and at some institutions, such as St. Norbert College, the student government elects members based on their year in school. In this structure, a certain number of seats will be apportioned to freshmen, a certain number to sophomore, etc.
4. *Academic Major Based.* The structure where representative seats are assigned to academic majors through academic colleges is probably one of the most popular. In these institutions, such as the University of Arkansas, the University of Alabama, and among many others, Stephen F. Austin State University, a governing body assigns a certain number of representative seats to an academic college based on the number of students enrolled, therefore assuring that the size of the constituency is based on the size of the student population in that academic college.
5. *Residential Living Based.* Some institutions focus their classification of students based on whether they live on-campus or off-campus, as was the case at the University of Arkansas prior to the 2000s. In this structure, student government seats were allocated to one of the two categories of living arrangement. Presumably, this structure led for the articulation of governing concerns most effectively, as concerns were based on the unique aspects of living within the city or living on the campus.

6. *Popular Vote*. For some institutions, the idea of voting is driven by populist thinking, meaning that students can run on any agenda or platform, but ultimately, the students with the most number of votes are seated in the student government. Presumably, a set number of representative seats are established, and students can vote for a set number of candidates, with those who receive the most number of votes 'winning' the election. A form of this is in place at the University of Montana.
7. *Individual Senates*. Multiple student governing bodies are in place at some institutions, allowing for students to best represent the categories that divide the campus. For example, Tulane University in New Orleans makes use of several student governments, and these represent the various academic divisions of the university. In such models, there might be a student government for students in the business school or the school of humanities.
8. *Self-Determined Constituencies*. A model that has been used with several small, private colleges has been a petition-driven method that empanels a set of student representatives. In this structure, a student gets a set number of fellow students to sign a petition of sorts, and in doing so, becomes a member of that representatives self-defined constituency.
9. *Hybrid Models*. Although each of these models have been used in exclusion at some higher education institution, they all conceptually can be combined to form hybrid models of student governance. This means that an institution might have self-determined constituencies within an environment where there are individual governing units. In such a model, student representatives might create their own constituencies within a college of education or business.

## CONCLUSION

Student government organizations can be designed to have a wide variety of outcomes. These outcomes might be related to student leadership development, to develop broad, inclusive decision options, or simply the self-regulation of student activities and monies. Ultimately, based on what the institution and those involved determine to be the most appropriate organizational outcomes, the structure of the student government should align with this desired functionality. That means if the primary activity is to regulate student organizations, for example, then the structure should have the best possible opportunity of understanding those organization's needs.

Many institutions do not take the time to critically reflect on their desired uses of shared governance bodies, such as student organizations, and rather, simply rely on the traditions and precedents established by previous generation of students and administrators. As the world of higher education has become more complex, and students are provided an ever-widening array of options for their post-secondary futures, colleges and universities need to be smart not only in what they offer, but in how they go about offering the college experience. A major part of this consideration needs to be how students are engaged in their own learning and the management of their own curriculum, and student government organizations are a logical extension of that conversation. College and university leaders need to be engaging with students on a regular basis, and need to explore how they can help facilitate student organization development and engagement. Student government is but one area of concern as institutions seek to be intentional in their design.

More than simply having an intentionality of student engagement, shared governance bodies designed for students need to be developed in a way that a maximum number of students can and will be involved. As Miles (1997) noted nearly 25 years ago, there is a broad apathy toward student governance, and college leaders need to be aware of ways to increase student involvement <sup>[9]</sup>.

Student affairs professionals, working in tandem with their student bodies, need to regularly review their structure of student government organization and consider which alternatives best meet their needs. These can change over time, and as illustrated by institutions like Alabama and Arkansas, constitutional conventions can be an excellent process for re-thinking the outcomes for shared student decision-making and the structures that best facilitate them.

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