

## Reviving an SGA: A Case Study

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Students become involved in campus activities for a variety of personal and professional reasons. Belonging to organizations can assist in students' personal development and may help them find employment upon graduating from the university (Albrecht, Carpenter, & Sivo, 1994). Belonging to campus organizations exposes students to different concepts, ideologies, people, and personalities (Astin, 1984). Organizations have the potential to provide students a sense of comfort and familiarity, and many may even foster student retention. By joining different organizations such as fraternities and sororities, leisure clubs, honors programs, or student government, college and university students learn about the functioning of the university and gain a sense of belonging (Cooper, Healy, & Simpson, 1994). This relationship in turn enhances students' psychosocial and professional development.

Student governance organizations may take many forms. Some institutions utilize a traditional student government structure, modeled after a state or national structure, while others design governing bodies to suit their unique needs (Alexander, 1969). The main technique institutions have used to increase student participation has been leadership training and representativeness training. Through training current and future student leaders, student affairs professionals and faculty have attempted to give students the skills needed to govern effectively. The cooperation of student affairs professionals has been targeted as instrumental in increasing students' participation and accomplishments in self-governance activities.

Governance is the decision-making, problem-solving, and goal-setting processes and activities involved in the short- and long-term functioning of higher education. Governance is intended to represent both formal and informal measures that can be used or implemented to increase participation and consensus development. Self-governance, then, is the process of allocating resources and developing and implementing policy for peer undergraduate and graduate college students. Specifically, this process alludes to student councils, governments, or senates, which are intended to represent the good intentions of the entire undergraduate student body.

The Student Government Association (SGA) at The University of Alabama has been in existence for over 100 years, and by the early 1990s had developed and sustained a reputation of control by a select group of undergraduate students. Reports of abuses

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were common, and administrative concern over the operation, intent, and functioning of the SGA resulted. Students often found themselves aligning with political entities from their first interaction during new student orientation. The concern and alleged abuses were so severe that the university's administration took the unusual stance of closing the student government organization in spring 1991.

Following a yearlong, student-directed constitutional convention and student referendum to re-establish the SGA, the university administration called for an evaluation of the new organization after one year of operation. Due to the scheduling of the new organization, the evaluation was postponed until the SGA's second year of operation. This also allowed for a full-set of orientation activities to occur following the implementation of the new organization.

The Student Life Office and the Vice President for Student Affairs appointed a 12-member task force to review documentation related to the effectiveness and functioning of the new SGA. The task force met 16 times over a twenty-week period to collectively interview representatives of each branch of the new SGA, the advisors of each branch, SGA members, student affairs professional staff, undergraduate and graduate students not affiliated with the SGA, and alumni. Additionally, the task force studied student legislation to identify any trends in SGA legislative behavior, and they surveyed members of the SGA executive council, student judiciary, senate, and general student body.

The primary difficulty in assessing the effectiveness of the new student government organization was in the establishment of a set of assumptions or framework for what an SGA should, or could, be responsible. This was particularly difficult in attempting to identify an appropriate mission of the SGA following its reconstitution.

Of concern to the task force was the creation of a general sense of the role and mission of student governance. Based on the beliefs and perspectives of the task force, student participation in governance activities was determined to be essential to the college experience. Consistent with this belief, the task force operated and created these recommendations under the assumption that students should have an opportunity to operate a political system, and that, at times, the university administration may not fully or completely agree with the manner in which the SGA operates (Cartwright, 1995). Moreover, it is beyond the scope of the initial SGA evaluation to understand why one group may dominate certain aspects of SGA. Although political parties may dominate undergraduate activities in a manner not pleasing to staff, the role of the division of student affairs is one of offering oversight and ensuring fairness (Astin, 1984).

The task force also accepted the assumption that students self-governance should be a learning activity and a means to foster undergraduate student leadership (Astin, 1984; Seitchek, 1982). Involvement in co- and extra-curricular activities is a vital component of the undergraduate experience and often provides the means for self-identification and growth (Williams & Winston, 1985). This participation can take the form of involvement in various clubs and activities, ranging from intramurals to honorary societies, and these 300-plus organizations must be taken into consideration during any conversation about apathy or involvement. Additionally, the task force accepted the assumption that there is substantial value to diversity and that diversity must be broadly

defined to include different cultures, religions and faiths, ethnicities, genders, and social affiliations.

Throughout the collection of data for the report, it was accepted that governance is not an exact science, and that responsive governance takes time to develop and evolve. In particular, students, whether or not they have a history of participation in governance, learn about their roles, political processes, conflict resolution, and constituent representation.

## Conclusion

The task force report was discussed extensively by undergraduate students and professionals in the division of student affairs. Although the operational portion of the evaluation received the majority of attention, the assumptions and framing of student government and student affairs have initiated broader thinking about the role, function, and purpose of student affairs in general and student self-governance in specific. Institutions should engage in discussing, comparing, and defining expectations with students, student affairs professionals, and faculty members, and should do this thoroughly before attempting to define program effectiveness.

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