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Student Government Associations: What Makes a Good Year?

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Abstract

College student government associations have historically played an important role in both providing students an opportunity to learn about civic structures and responsibility along with providing a forum for the expression of student interests to the institution at large. Much like their public counterparts, however, it can be difficult to identify whether or not these bodies are performing effectively. The current study sought to identify, from student government advisors, leaders and members, how to evaluate their work over the course of a year. Although there were several significant differences identified between the three groups on data from a research-team developed survey, there was consensus around the ideas of passing legislation and doing work that matters to the student body at large and in meeting the needs of students as constituents.

Keywords: college student government, college student involvement, college student engagement, program assessment, student affairs evaluation, student affairs programming, college student government effectiveness, student government associations

1. Introduction

Higher education institutions provide a broad array of opportunities for student engagement on campus, many of which are situated and structured within divisions of student affairs. Many of these opportunities have been developed with the dual purpose of both helping the institution operate as well as providing experiences that help students grow, develop, and mature (kuh, 1995; Kuh & Lund, 1994). Prominent among these offerings are student government bodies designed to both engage students and teach them about the possibilities and responsibilities of democratic societies (Bray, 2006). Whether termed Student Council, Student Government, Associated Students, or Student Government Association, they are charged with engaging students in activities and policy formation that care for all students on campus (Laosebikan-Buggs, 2006).

Student government bodies are generally structured around some sort of election that empanels students in a formal body, often with positions allocated based on some criterion, such as academic major or discipline of study (Nadler & Miller, 2022). These organizations might include traditional representative bodies such as executive, legislative, and judicial branches, and the entire structure is typically overseen by a professional advisor (Dahlgren, 2017). The combination of the advisor working in tandem with the elected students creates an opportunity for these bodies to be thoughtful and strategic in what they undertake, and ultimately, how well they undertake these activities.

In addition to formal assigned roles, such as the distribution of student fee money, student governments vary in how they construct and implement their agendas. In some instances these agendas are tightly aligned with other governance bodies on campus, and in others they are independent and do not reflect those other groups' priorities (Miller & Nadler, 2019). They also vary considerably from the agendas advocated or prioritized by senior campus leaders, such as presidents and chancellors (DiLoreto-Hill, 2022).

The question of what a student government body addresses has little literature or research-based precedence, and conversations about determining the effectiveness of a student legislative body might be based primarily on national work with state and federal legislatures. Raskind (1992), for example, explored how to best evaluate the effectiveness of an individual legislator, introducing criteria such as voter satisfaction, peer professional perceptions, mastery of substantive material, and service to the public good. Other models of determining the effectiveness of an overall legislative body include criteria such as number of bills sponsored and how far those bills advanced in committee hearings (Bucchianeri, Volden, & Wiseman, 2020), polling constituents to identify their levels of satisfaction (Jones, 2021), and the connection of introduced legislation to important, current societal issues (Born, 2015).

As with other governance bodies, establishing criteria or understanding whether or not the body is effective can be difficult to establish. There can be any number of metrics that include variables such as attendance, voting participation, level of student participation in elections, expressions of interest, and the number of pieces of legislation that are introduced and passed. There is, however, little described about what makes for a good or productive year, and

whether these criteria are the same for the advisors and professional staff and for elected participants and leaders. Therefore, the purpose for conducting the current study was to identify the commonly agreed upon criteria for establishing student government performance and to what extent these criteria are consistent across different participants.

2. Background of the Study

To make any determination about whether or not student government bodies have a "successful" or "good" year, at least three broad areas must first be considered. There must be some understanding of what these legislative bodies are designed to accomplish (design). Then, there must be an understanding of what they choose to undertake (effort), and finally, the context of the bodies operations must be considered (context).

2.1 Design

Student governments on college campuses can be traced to the 1800s and have been designed to undertake a variety of activities. Early student government bodies often had specific assignments to oversee activities or facilities, including the student union at the University of Pennsylvania and the bookstore and athletics at the University of California at Berkeley. These organizations, however, have evolved to focus on perhaps three main areas: joining student voices together, representing student interests to the campus and administration, and assuring the importance of the student voice in democracy on campus (Carlton, 2021).

Most institutions that sponsor a student government have a mission statement or publicly pronounced reason for the organization's existence. These range broadly in what they include and would typically be scripted and approved by an institution's administration and possibly governing board. The student government at Milwaukee Area Technical College, for example, offers the following as a rationale and scope of work

> Through each campus' Student Government elected representatives, students are free to make recommendations to the administration on any college issue. While the Student Government cannot make laws by its own action, its recommendations are given serious consideration by the administration (MATC Student Life and Resources, para. 2)

Similarly, the University of Houston-Victoria's student government constitution includes the statement

> The Student Government Association is the official liaison between the student body and the university administration. It serves as the mechanism for student input into institutional decision making (UHV Student Government, 2021, para. 2).

From an institutional perspective, websites documenting constitutions and defining roles for student governments may provide a roadmap for the work these bodies are designed to undertake. There may be a secondary rationale for providing student government bodies, however, that is more closely related to student development. As Bray (2006), Kuh and Lund

(1994), and Kuh (1995) have suggested, there may be developmental outcomes tied to participating in a student government experience that result in greater maturity, openness to differing ideas, and feelings of importance in democratic society participation. These same kinds of outcomes have been identified as potential outcomes of student governments across different types of institutions, including community colleges (Miles, 2017).

These two perspectives, then, provide a formal sense of understanding about what student governments are designed to do. They provide a formal outlet and mechanism for student engagement with the institution, with a secondary role of providing an important tool to further the personal development, and perhaps identity development, of the student.

2.2 Effort

There are at least three dimensions described in the literature base about the exploration of what student governments are actually undertaking in their work, regardless of what they might be designed to do. The first dimension includes what institutions expect student governments to focus their work on, including activities such as fee allocations and representing issues they define as appropriate to central administration (Jones, 1983; Laosebikan-Buggs, 2006) and providing judicial oversight for student behaviors (Harris & Dyer, 2006). This conception of activity relates to the era of formalizing governance in higher education, as evidenced by the work of McGrath (1970) and the assignment of tasks to student government bodies.

The second dimension of what these government associations talk about can be identified by the exploration of what is presented in online reporting through websites and student newspapers or media outlets. With such open reporting, students on campus as well as administrators and others interested in the activities of the governing body are provided an ability to see first-hand and in an unfiltered manner the agendas of what their elected representatives are undertaking. And although some institutions, such as the University of Michigan and Arizona State University restrict access to their meeting materials to current students only, other institutions make their materials open to the general public at large. Institutions such as the University of Nevada, Reno (ASUN, 2022), the University of Arkansas-Little Rock (UALR SGA, 2022), and Auburn University (AU SGA, 2022) provide examples of open and accessible meeting information.

The third dimension of understanding the work of student government associations is constructed through understanding the few studies that have sought to identify and explore the student government agenda. Most recently, DiLoreto-Hill (2022) explored several research universities to understand if the work of the student government association aligned with the institutional priorities as evidenced and presented by campus leadership, such as a chancellor or provost. He found little alignment between the work of the student government body and the language and messages of the campus presidents, concluding that their work is largely independent of what the campus community might be discussing. Similarly, Miller and Nadler (2019) found little consistency between the agenda topics and discussion of student government bodies and their faculty senates on campus, concluding that their constituent responsiveness most likely motivated their agenda development. In both studies

the findings suggest that different constituents on campus explore and deal with different elements, perhaps rightly so based on their constituent desired outcomes, but also somewhat surprising based on the scope of work being limited to one institution with constituents that tend to have very similar interests.

2.3 Context

DiLoreto-Hill's (2022) study provides a strong example of the context in which student governments operate. He found issues related to accommodations and practices during the Covid pandemic were prominent in student government work, reflecting the concerns of the student body (as well as the society) at large. In this context, the agenda for student government was formed and motivated by larger issues impacting both the campus and society. Similarly, Chambers and Phelps (1993) offered a conceptual argument that organizations such as student governments naturally serve as conduits for engaging students in activism, and that as issues prompt student concern, bodies such as student government can bring voices together to prompt a response to broad issues.

Examples of context driving a student government's work include the Associated Students of the Oregon Institute of Technology's formal opposition of the institution's attempt to increase tuition (Roberts, 2022), Northwestern University's student government challenging the composition of a presidential search committee (Lee, 2021), and Iowa State's student government challenging the inclusion of a conservative religiously-affiliated university in their sports conference (Klepps, 2021).

There are at least two theoretical understandings of how this context creates a work agenda for a governance body. The first is guided by Kingdon's (2010) description of agenda setting where pressures are exerted at different times on legislative bodies by a wide range of constituents, creating opportunities for topics to be considered and prioritized. In this model, issues can present themselves in a variety of forms, including evident problems, assessment results, and gaps in programming. The other prominent model in agenda setting is that of citizen demand making, whereby constituents go out of their way to contact those in power to demand change (Sharp, 1984).

In order to identify whether a student government is performing well, that is, having a good year, these dimensions of design, effort, and context must be considered. Through an understanding of what governments are designed to do, where they are expending their efforts, and what the context is for their performance, an initial understanding can be created about how to best assess their work.

3. Research Methods

In order to generalize beyond one institution, quantitative research methods guided the study. We made use of a random sample of public Carnegie designated Research 1 and 2 universities. The inclusion of these 108 Research 1 and 93 Research 2 universities was intentional, as they have some similar defining characteristics, such as their size and their mission focus on scholarship. Each of these 201 universities were then studied online to identify the student government president and vice president, the student government advisor,

and a leading legislative officer, such as a 'president pro tem' of the student senate or chair of the student congress. Online resources were highly inconsistent, however, and not every student government association provided identifiable information (including names and email addresses) for the three groups of participants we intended to include in the study. As a result, the sample included a total of 631 participants, including 322 presidents and vice presidents, 146 advisors, and 163 leaders of the student senate.

We constructed a four-part survey instrument to better describe and understand student government agenda creation and ultimately, assess the work of this governing body. In the first section of the survey, we included elements of programs for assessment identified by the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS), specifically, the CAS 'general standards' for programs in higher education (CAS, 2022). The second section included 10 elements of effectiveness in a government legislative body, adapted from the work of Born (2015) and Bucchianeri, Volden, and Wiseman (2020). The third section of the survey included 7 items related to the role and scope of student government associations based on the functions of government. And the fourth section of the survey was an open-ended response asking participants to indicate what they perceived to be as the single most important element to consider when evaluating the work of a student government association.

The survey made use of a Likert-type scale to understand the participants perspectives on each item. In the scale, 5=A Great Deal progressing to 1=Never. The scale is listed by each table.

The survey instrument was pilot tested with a group of student government leaders and 3 advisors, all of whom were not participants in the study. Following revisions to the instrument, it was distributed in the spring 2022 academic semester using an online survey software program. Reminder emails were sent at four-day intervals to non-respondents.

A total of 193 survey responses were received and determined to be usable in the data analysis. This number of responses was 30.5% of the population that the survey was sent to and was deemed appropriate for online survey response research methods. The responses included 59 from advisors (40.41% response rate), 94 presidents and vice presidents (29.19% response rate), and 40 student senate leaders (24.53% response rate).

4. Findings

The first section of the survey included 12 items from the Council for the Advancement of Standards framework on program evaluation criteria. These are general items that CAS has identified have applicability to multiple programmatic areas. For a combination of all three groups of respondents, the most strongly agreed to evaluative criteria to be used for SGAs included fulfilling the mission statement ($\bar{x}$ =4.84), offering appropriate programs and services ($\bar{x}$ =4.68) and ethics, law, and policy ($\bar{x}$ =4.65). Conversely, they agreed least strongly with human resources (3.71) and technology use ($\bar{x}$ =3.73). There was some variation, however, among the ratings when divided by respondent type (see Table 1). Advisors, for example, agreed most strongly with Mission ($\bar{x}$ =4.86) and Student Learning,

Development, and Success ($\bar{x}$ =4.77), and SGA Executives and Legislators both agreed most strongly with Program and Services ($\bar{x}$ =4.95 and $\bar{x}$ =4.76, respectively), and Mission ($\bar{x}$ =4.91 and $\bar{x}$ =4.72, respectively). SGA Advisors and Legislators agreed least that Human Resources should be used in evaluating the work of the SGA ($\bar{x}$ =3.63 and $\bar{x}$ =3.77, respectively), and SGA Executives agreed least with use of Technology ($\bar{x}$ =3.70). A two-tailed Analysis of Variance was then conducted on these data and identified three significant differences using a Tukey post-hoc analysis. The differences were identified between the SGA Advisor mean for Program and Services and the mean ratings of those from the SGA Executives and SGA Legislators on this item (*f*-value 3.241 and 2.973; $p < .05$). Similarly, a significant difference was identified between the mean rating of SGA Advisors and Executives on the item of Student Learning, Development, and Success (*f*=4.682).

Table 1. CAS Standards Framework as Evaluation Criteria Mean Ratings

	Advisor n=59	SGA Exec n=94	SGA Legislator n=40	All n=193
Mission	4.86	4.91	4.72	4.84
Program and Services	4.22	4.95	4.76	4.68
Student Learning, Development, and Success	4.77	4.35	4.44	4.49
Assessment	3.98	3.69	3.99	3.84
Access, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion	3.90	4.20	4.34	4.14
Leadership, Management, and Supervision	4.15	4.53	4.40	4.38
Human Resources	3.63	3.75	3.77	3.71
Communication and Collaboration	4.25	4.54	4.34	4.41
Ethics, Law, and Policy	4.50	4.78	4.63	4.65
Financial Resources	4.50	4.21	4.33	4.32
Technology	3.66	3.70	3.89	3.73
Facilities and Infrastructure	3.91	3.99	4.00	3.96

The responses answer the question: To what extent are these used to evaluate your student government association's work. Rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale where 5=A great deal, 4=Regularly, 3=Somewhat, 2=Rarely, and 1=Never.

The second section of the survey included performance variables commonly associated with public governing bodies. As a group of respondents, the highest average rating was given to ethical behavior ($\bar{x}$ =4.87), followed by member attendance (4.79) and addressing topics that matter ($\bar{x}$ =4.71; see Table 2). The SGA advisors' ratings mirrored those of the group in the same order for the most agreed upon. The SGA Executives similarly agreed most strongly with ethical behavior ($\bar{x}$ =4.86) but had rule compliance ($\bar{x}$ =4.82) as their second most agreed to and member attendance as their third ($\bar{x}$ =4.75). SGA legislators had the same high mean

rating for ethical behavior and addressing topics that matter ($\bar{x}$ =4.81), followed by member attendance ($\bar{x}$ =4.79). The least agreement for the group was peer evaluation ($\bar{x}$ =3.87) and this was similarly the lowest mean for the Advisors and Legislators. The SGA Executives agreed least strong with popular community perceptions ($\bar{x}$ =3.68).

Table 2. Perceptions of Effectiveness based on Performance Variables

	Advisor n=59	SGA Exec n=94	SGA Legislator n=40	All n=193
Open/robust debate	4.06	3.89	4.22	4.01
Member attendance	4.88	4.75	4.79	4.79
Popular perceptions	4.72	3.68	4.00	4.06
Filled seats	4.55	4.23	4.11	4.30
Technical operations	4.41	4.36	4.40	4.38
Topics matter	4.73	4.66	4.81	4.71
Number of complaints	4.09	3.99	4.12	4.04
Rule compliance	4.25	4.82	4.30	4.53
Peer evaluation	4.00	3.81	3.85	3.87
Ethical behavior	4.93	4.86	4.81	4.87

The responses answer the question: To what extent do you agree that this element is appropriate to evaluate the effectiveness of your student government association. Rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale where 5=A great deal, 4=Regularly, 3=Somewhat, 2=Rarely, and 1=Never.

The third section of the survey included 7 areas of SGA work, or focus areas, that are appropriate to evaluate. These areas of focus are common elements of most SGAs. As a group, the strongest agreement was on including fiscal work ($\bar{x}$ =4.75), judicial affairs ($\bar{x}$ =4.68), and regulatory work ($\bar{x}$ =4.65) and community responsiveness ($\bar{x}$ =4.65) in evaluating the effectiveness of an SGA. Advisors agreed most strongly with fiscal work ($\bar{x}$ =4.89) followed by checks and balances ($\bar{x}$ =4.88) and judicial work ($\bar{x}$ =4.71). They agreed least with procedural elements. SGA Executives agreed most strongly with fiscal (4.88), procedural ($\bar{x}$ =4.85), and judicial work ($\bar{x}$ =4.77), and least strongly with checks and balances ($\bar{x}$ =4.30). SGA Legislators agreed most strongly with checks and balances ($\bar{x}$ =4.90), regulatory work ($\bar{x}$ =4.66), and responsiveness ($\bar{x}$ =4.63), and least strongly with procedural considerations ($\bar{x}$ =4.00). The analysis of variance identified a significant difference between the mean scores of the SGA Executives gave to procedural elements ($\bar{x}$ =4.85) and those provided by Advisors ($\bar{x}$ =4.37) and Legislators ($\bar{x}$ =4.00; f=3.22; $p < .05$).

Table 3. Perceived Role and Scope of Student Government Associations

	Advisor n=59	SGA Exec n=94	SGA Legislator n=40	All n=193
Regulatory	4.70	4.63	4.66	4.65
Procedural	4.37	4.85	4.00	4.52
Responsive	4.53	4.74	4.63	4.65
Fiscal	4.89	4.88	4.26	4.75
Judicial	4.71	4.77	4.44	4.68
Protection of rights	4.63	4.74	4.38	4.63
Checks and balances	4.88	4.30	4.90	4.60

The responses answer the question: To what extent do you agree that each focus is appropriate to evaluate the effectiveness of your student government association. Rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale where 5=A great deal, 4=Regularly, 3=Somewhat, 2=Rarely, and 1=Never.

The final section of the survey provided an open-ended question that asked respondents to write-in their perceptions of what criteria should be used for assessing SGA work. Over a third of all respondents wrote in some version of "passing legislation that matters to students" (n=66; see Table 4). They also wrote in "meeting the needs of constituents" (n=48), aligning work with faculty/staff senate (n=40), and "preserving student rights" (n=39). Several other items were recorded from the written responses but were not mentioned by many respondents, such as the idea of using focus groups or surveys of students to come to consensus about whether the student government did its job.

Table 4. Open-ended Responses Regarding Criteria for Assessment[1]

Narrative Response	Frequency
Passing legislation that matters to students	66
Meetings needs of constituents	48
Aligning work with faculty/staff senate	40
Preserving student rights	39
360 evaluations	12
Focus groups	4
Survey students to see if we are doing well	1

[1]*Note*: in some instances, the wording was approximate to the categories listed here. For example, "passing legislation that matters to students" also encompassed "voting for legislation that makes for a better experience for students" and "passing bills that matter for students."

5. Discussion

These findings offer a beginning of the conversation about how to evaluate student government bodies, and despite strong agreement from different constituencies, there is still a tremendous amount to discuss and debate about these organizations. As shown in the literature, student governments play a variety of functional roles on campus, providing a

consolidating body to students for their collective voices to be heard to administrators on campus, but they also play an important role in the development of the student. In these ways, very different criteria for determining whether or not a student government is working are identified, and they are in some ways at odds with each other. Those that express needs to the administrative system of the institution can drive explorations of efficiency and accuracy, while those tied to personal development must focus on personal responsibility and personal growth of values, ethics, etc.

As Rashkind (1992) described, the evaluation of elected officials and their work can be hard to formally identify and evaluate. Perhaps the most relevant of the findings of the current study were the open-ended, write-in responses from participants that were about accomplishing things that matter to students on campus and preserving these student rights. As a group, these respondents seemed to loudly proclaim that the student government body is a functional attribute of the campus that must work to protect student rights. And, this may be a movement that has arisen recently due to the continued corporatization of the modern university. But the finding also stresses that the student association has a distinct role in serving students, much the same as public legislative bodies have a responsibility to correspond with their constituents.

The elements used to attempt to identify evaluative criteria did illustrate some differences in thinking among students, their advisors, and their leaders. But, for the findings did offer some deeper insight into what should be considered in looking at the work of a student government. This included most strongly the idea that the student government body must have a mission, and that this mission should be articulated and clear and that ultimately the ability to claim that the mission was accomplished is what should be used to determine whether or not the body ‘had a good year.’

Some of the other evaluative criteria that were presented for consideration in the study yielded results that are consistent with societal expectations of larger legislative bodies. Thinking about effectiveness in terms of member attendance at meetings and strong regulatory compliance are common in the world of civic current events. Strong ratings, however, of elements such as addressing topics that matter and the protection of student rights should reinvigorate feelings that student governments have a responsibility larger than simply handing out funds to student organizations.

Overall, the findings of the study provide a good first step in exploring and thinking about how legislative work can and should be measured. Student government bodies provide more than just a training ground for students with an interest in politics or a career in government work, and this need to offer the larger student body a mechanism and forum for their interests to be articulated is critical as higher education continues to evolve. Future research should attempt to identify clear outcomes for student government organizations as well as the criteria by which they should be evaluated. This research must first be descriptive in nature and should then be extrapolated to different structures and types of student government organizations. By better clarifying what student governments are supposed to do and the identification of the criteria can institutions best gauge whether they are offering appropriate

and meaningful experiences to aid in student development.

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