



## First among equals: A profile of the American college student government president

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### Abstract

To accomplish a central role in higher education decision-making, students have developed and refined an intricate system of shared governance, typically resulting in a formal body referred to as a student government. As college student governments have evolved, they have assumed positions of great power at some institutions, and at others, are rarely even consulted in decision-making. A by-product of this evolution has been a changing role for the leader of these organizations, commonly referred to as a student government president. The current investigation attempted to describe the individuals, their characteristics, and their perceptions about the issues they work with on their campuses. Using a research-team developed survey instrument, a US national sample of research-focused institutions were identified, and their student government presidents were surveyed. Student leaders were described in terms of their class standing, their election protocols, the benefits they receive from serving in the elected leadership position, and the challenges they face on their campuses. The most challenging issues they reported facing were parking (access to campus), and student involvement, and when asked to freely identify the most pressing issue they were working with during the current semester, they identified the costs associated with attending college in the form of fees outside of tuition.

**Keywords:** college students, student leadership, shared governance, decision-making.

### 1. Introduction

Collegiate student government bodies have assumed a position of prominence both within institutional decision-making and institutional stature. High voter turnout coupled with elaborate campaigns reflect a climate of student government that has evolved greatly over the past 50 years when students first sought to truly be engaged in the institution's decision-making. The current practice of campaigning for votes, voter blocks, party creation, and even campaign fundraising all illustrate a segment of the student self-governance process that did not exist, or existed in a far different manner, only a few decades ago.

College student governments, known often as "associated student governments," "student government associations," or among other terms, "undergraduate student government," are typically identified as a body of elected students who are tasked with representing the activities, actions, and interests of students enrolled at a specific institution. There are a wide variety of these types of student associations, ranging from academic-major or college based apportionments to self-defined constituent development. Some are classified as representing only undergraduates while others represent both undergraduates and graduate students. They similarly have a range of responsibilities, including disbursing student fee money to registered student organizations to being able to vote on institutional governing board decisions. Many of these organizations participate in state-wide or system-wide activities, and there is even an association, the American Student Government Association, to provide training, socialization, and assistance with activities (American Student Government Association, 2018).

There are several key individuals who set the tone for both the behavior

and effectiveness of a student government, including senior institutional leadership who purport to value these actions, the student government advisor who coaches behaviors and actions, and the leader of the organization, typically referred to as a president or chair. The president of the student government body is typically elected from the general student body, although there are different models for this, including the election of a president from within the elected government body (often referred to, for ease, as the 'senate'). The president of the student government establishes codes and behaviors of conduct, provides overall direction for activities and the agenda, and, in many respects determines to what extent politics pervade within a government and to what extent the experience is one of development and learning (Miles, The student government leader holds an increasingly complex position. One perspective on the role is that the individual is the 'first-among-equals' who provides a collective voice to the student body. Another perspective is that the individual holds a partisan role and advocates for a defined set of interests, such as a political party or affiliation. Another is that the position is, by definition, one of acrimony with administration, defining the role of student government as the protector of student interests and rights. And yet another depiction might be of the academically inclined student who finds such student-body advocacy as one in conflict with academic interests and relationships with faculty members. There is, broadly, little conceptual or specific knowledge and understanding of the student government president. Therefore, the purpose for conducting the current study was to identify and describe the characteristics of college student government presidents in institutions with well-developed and mature student government associations.

## 2. Background of the Study

There is a growing body of literature on the idea of college student governance, and although there are allusions to the ancient student unions of Bologna, Italy, the majority of this work has been developed since the 1960s. This research has focused on the topics student governments consider in legislation, how leaders are identified and trained, and even the symmetry of student government and faculty government agendas (Miller & Nadler, 2018). Research has also highlighted individuals involved in student government, including motivation to vote or run for office in student government elections (Miles, Nadler, & Miller, 2011) and how these leaders are developed and transition into their offices (Miles, 2010B; 2011; 2012). The existing literature foundation, however, does not include a description of who these college student leaders are or their outlook on the student government process and activities.

Student governance has evolved over time in both intentional and unintentional ways. The growth of college student enrollments from the broad population, including the middle-class of society, brought to campus a different type of student. These students were less tied to the traditions of the academy and, in demanding change, found a collective voice to be an effective tool for bringing about institutional change. On many campuses, the activism that often seemed random had logical structures, and ultimately, logical outcomes. Students collective actions often brought administrative leaders to the conclusion that formalizing a student voice in decision-making was an important organizational function, if not a relief valve for dissipating student dissatisfaction with a campus. The result often was the creation of formal student empowerment activities and bodies, sometimes resulting in students sitting on boards of trustees, and at the very least, formalized governing powers for students in select areas (Laosebikan-Buggs, 2006) [5].

Leadership in student government bodies varies based on a number of factors, including institutional size, mission, apportionment strategy, and even the state laws governing institutions. In some institutions, for example, student government voting is based on academic disciplines, probably the most common method for determining a student government composition. Some smaller colleges, however, make use of self-defined constituents, where an individual interested in serving on the student senate simply obtains signatures for a set number of fellow students. Other institutions, predominantly urban institutions, use different criteria such as where students live, with on-campus residential students occupying certain seats in the senate, and those living off-campus occupying others.

Historically, some student governments have taken on undesirable characteristics, including intimidation and political control of student government behaviors. These consequences can be significant, particularly if the student government holds, approves, and disburses student fee money. Famously, the University of Alabama was highlighted in a popular magazine, referring to their student government as a “machine” and the “most powerful fraternity in the country” (Weiss, 1992) [19]

Political machinations of student government have been anecdotally widespread, with little documentation of their actual use or abuse of power. The concern expressed in many of these situations is that some form of political party, often organized around social organizations or a particular academic major, such as Greek-letter fraternities and

sororities or law students, dominate the operations of the student senate. Such control can result, over time, in distorted views of political power on campus and can lead, potentially, to corrupt systems of resource distribution (Miller, Randall, Whipple, & Kuh, 1999) [16].

Despite the potential problems associated with the implementation of a student government, they have also been described as important training grounds for students to learn about compromise, organization, persuasion, time management, and participation in a democratic society (Bray, 2006) [2]. Some of this literature has also focused on the impact on student development, with the opportunity for socialization and decision-making aiding in a student’s growth and movement closer to identity formation (Kuh & Lund, 1994) [4].

## 3. Materials and Methods

The sample for the study included representation from public higher education institutions classified by Carnegie Foundation as Very High Research Activity and High Research Activity. This listing included 94 Very High and 91 High research activity institutions; however, two institutions were removed from inclusion in the study. These two institutions included an international university in a US territory, an upper-level para-military service academy, resulting in a total possible sample of 183 institutions. Each institution was then manually searched for their online presence, and the current student government president at each of these institutions was identified with corresponding email address recorded. The process of identifying a current student government president, however, proved somewhat problematic, and 10 institutions either did not report a student government presence on their campuses or did not list current student government members. The result was a total sample size of 172 student government presidents.

Data were collected using a research-team developed survey instrument. The instrument contained four distinct sections: (1) general characteristics of student government presidents, (2) an identification of benefits received for serving as president, (3) an identification of the most challenging issues facing the student government, and (4) an identification of the biggest single issue facing the student government during the coming semester. The survey was developed using an electronic survey platform and distributed to a panel of student government leaders not included in the national sample. Following revisions suggested by the first distribution, an expert panel of three student government presidents were provided the revised survey for their input. With their feedback, the instrument was finalized and distributed to a group of 15 student government presidents in comprehensive universities. Their feedback provided verification of the face validity of the survey, and a Cronbach alpha of .7001 was reported from their responses.

## 4. Results

Using two email follow-up reminders inviting the identified student government presidents to participate in the study, a total of 54 usable, fully-completed surveys were received (31.3% response rate). The response rate was deemed acceptable due to the descriptive nature of the current study, and was consistent with other online survey response rates.

As shown in Table 1, nearly three-fourths of the respondents were first-year seniors, two-thirds were elected as part of a

block-ticket, 85% of the presidents identified themselves as part of a student-developed political party, and fewer than 15% of the presidents were serving a second (or more) term. Nearly 90% of the responding presidents indicated that half or less of the eligible student body voted during their last election.

Presidents indicated that they perceived their governing body moderately to very effectively represented the interests of the study body ( $\bar{x} = 2.59$ ) and that they were extremely to very effective in working with the institution's faculty senate ( $\bar{x} = 1.72$ ).

**Table 1:** Characteristics of Student Government Presidents

Characteristic	n	%
Class Standing		
Sophomore	0	0
Junior	8	15
First Year Senior	40	74
Fifth Year or Beyond Senior	4	7
Graduate Student	2	4
Term of Service		
First Term	47	87
Second or more term	7	13
Elected as part of political party		
Yes	46	85
No	8	15
Elected on a 'block ticket'		
Yes	36	66
No	18	33
Percent of undergraduate student body who voted		
Under 20%	32	59
21-50%	16	29
51-75%	4	7
More than 75%	2	4
How effective is student government in		
Representing broad interests of the student body	$\bar{x} = 2.59$	
Collaborating with the faculty senate	$\bar{x} = 1.72$	

Table 2: provides a listing of the benefits that were associated with serving as the student government president. The most common benefit was being assigned an office with computer ( $n=50$ ; 92.6%), followed by receiving a salary or stipend ( $n=44$ ; 81.5%) and receiving a scholarship ( $n=43$ ; 79.6%). As a note, respondents could indicate receiving multiple benefits for their service, so the salary or stipend

that presidents indicated that they received could also have been from a scholarship; the two were not mutually exclusive. Approximately a fifth of the presidents received a tuition waiver for serving in their roles ( $n=10$ ; 18.5%), yet none of the respondents reported receiving meals, housing, or cell phones for their service.

**Table 2:** Benefits Received for Serving as Student Government President.

Benefit for Service	Yes	%	No	%
Office and computer	50	92.6	4	7.4
Salary/stipend	44	81.5	10	18.5
Scholarship	43	79.6	11	20.4
Shirts, pens, trinkets	35	64.8	19	35.2
Travel funding	35	64.8	19	35.2
Awards banquet	30	55.5	24	44.5
Conference registration	29	53.7	25	46.3
Reserved parking	21	38.8	33	61.1
Free tickets to sporting events, concerts	20	37.0	34	62.9
Free food	13	24	41	75.9
Other perks	11	20.3	43	79.6
Tuition scholarship/waiver	10	18.5	44	81.5
Clothing allowance	2	3.7	52	96.7
Academic credit	2	3.7	52	96.7
Tuition and housing scholarship/waiver	0	0.0	54	100
Housing scholarship/waiver	0	0.0	54	100
Housing preference	0	0.0	54	100
Meal scholarship/waiver	0	0.0	54	100
Cell phone	0	0.0	54	100

The greatest challenges student government presidents indicated that they were dealing with during their current

academic year included parking ( $\bar{x}=4.07$ ), student involvement ( $\bar{x}=4.00$ ), communication with the overall

student body ( $\bar{x}$ =3.82), sexual assault and violence on campus ( $\bar{x}$ =3.64), and tuition costs ( $\bar{x}$ =3.61; see Table 3). Of the challenges presented to the student government leaders, they perceived their relationship with the

institution’s president to be the least challenging ( $\bar{x}$ =1.64), followed by teaching quality ( $\bar{x}$ =2.71) and athletics ( $\bar{x}$ =2.79).

**Table 3: Most Challenging Issues Faced as Student Government President**

Challenge	$\bar{x}$	SD	Variance
Parking	4.07	1.13	1.28
Student involvement	4.00	1.16	1.36
Communication with student body	3.82	1.10	1.22
Sexual assault/violence	3.64	1.11	1.23
Tuition costs	3.61	1.32	1.74
Race relations	3.54	1.24	1.53
Safety on campus	3.39	1.21	1.45
Campus facilities	3.29	1.36	1.85
Student rights	3.22	1.23	1.51
Meeting attendance	2.93	1.19	1.42
Finances	2.86	1.33	1.77
Allocation of student fee money	2.82	1.26	1.58
Athletics	2.79	1.35	1.81
Teaching quality	2.71	1.25	1.56
Relationship with university chancellor/ president	1.64	1.14	1.30

As shown in Table 4, 43 student government leaders identified the issues or challenges that they perceived to be their biggest or most significant single issue for the remainder of the academic year by filling in a blank line, writing in free-form. Respondents identified 23 unique issues, including student fees ( $n$ =7) and student mental

health ( $n$ =4) as the most commonly identified issues. Of the remaining issues, 14 of them were identified by a single respondent, illustrating the uniqueness of each institution’s student government. These issues included topics such as creating a new cabinet office, civic engagement, and voting access.

**Table 4: Biggest Single Issue Addressed on Campus in the Spring Semester**

Issue	Mentioned by $n$ students
Student fees	7
Student mental health	4
Sexual assault	3
Food insecurity	3
Parking	3
Student government rights/recognition	3
Reconciling student religious rights	3
Student safety	2
University housing	2
Restructuring academic course	2
Student health center	1
University’s board of trustees	1
Preventing corruption in the upcoming election	1
Awareness/improvement of student resources	1
Modification of fee allocations	1
Creating new cabinet office	1
Civic engagement	1
Voting access	1
Composting on campus	1
Campus aesthetics	1
Dining options	1
Sustainability	1
New student code of conduct	1
Transparency for student fees	1

**5. Discussion and Conclusions**

College student governments play an important role in higher education; they serve as training grounds for students to become engaged civic participants while also providing an important out-of-class laboratory for experimentation and personal growth. The survey questions about who is participating in student government as a president provides an interesting snapshot of who those individuals are. They

were mostly upper-classmen, as might be expected, and the vast majority were serving in their first term as president. The use of a political party was also commonly identified, as was running with a declared vice president in making use of a block ticket, just as many state and national elections use. What was somewhat surprising, though, was the low voter turnout in these elections, although this type of level of participation was identified over two decades ago by

Miles (1997) who noted apathy in student government. And, even though they had low voter turnouts, with the majority of institutions reporting under 20% of the student body voting, they still indicated that they represented their interests of their student population effectively.

The high agreement indicated in representing broad student interests might well be a true and accurate projection, as student governments might hold town hall meetings, have open calls for agenda items, and work to engage constituents in defining the student government agenda. Or, there might be a true disconnect between what the student government is engaged in and prioritizes as compared to the interests of the student body. An attempt to align student interests, perhaps through identifying issues through student media, for example, with student government work and actions might be an important area for research to validate.

Serving as perhaps one of the most visible students on campus, the student government president plays an important role in representing the voice of students to both administration and the public. The elements of compensation that these individuals received included both the expected, such as an office and computer, to the unexpected, such as clothing allowance. Two individuals indicated that they received academic credit for serving as president, perhaps illustrating the university's understanding of the complexity and commitment required of the role, and a large percentage of institutions also acknowledged this by their provision of a salary or stipend for serving as president.

The issues student government presidents identified as being the most challenging were mostly legacy-based issues, meaning that they were issues that have had a prolonged presence on campus. Parking, involvement, tuition, race relations, sexual assault, etc., are all issues that have been a challenge for the academy to address for a prolonged period of time. The self-identification of student fees being a major issue to be dealt with was also something that could be considered a 'legacy-issue,' but the identification of student mental health issues might be something relatively new for students to identify as a significant issue. Indeed, the question of how student mental health is addressed and serviced on campus is something that is growing nationally as an issue, and student governments working on their individual campuses on this issue might be a reflection of governments responding to student needs.

Overall there needs to be a better tracking of who is serving in student leadership positions such as these student government presidents. Their stories in turn need to be shared to help others realize the potential impact of serving in leadership positions, and importantly, what the consequences to oneself for this type of service. Longitudinal studies might also be helpful in identifying the impact of this kind of service and what the ultimate impact is on an individual's identity and future behaviors. These types of stories might be crafted through qualitative research, and held up by college faculty members as demonstrating the impact of serving others.

Further research on the student government leader can and should take many forms. Stories of individuals from under-represented populations could be meaningful, and the strategies that student government leaders take to gather stakeholder input could provide important lessons to others. Ultimately, regular reporting and discussions of student government behaviors and best practices can be helpful to

current and future generations of student leaders who are looking for effective ways to engage their communities.

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