

NATIONAL LOBBY GROUPS Is a New Alliance Needed?

By Chelsea Ellis

Imagine you're a newly elected Student Government president. You discover in the morning paper that the state legislature wants to raise tuition for colleges and universities—again. “How can we stop this?” you wonder. You remember hearing that California student leaders successfully lobbied to prevent a tuition hike, and you need to know how they did it.

What if there were a truly national student organization to provide resources, networking, and communication between the thousands of campus leaders nationwide? Such a group could be a means to enhance and encourage state alliances by sharing information and resources, or it could lobby the federal government on higher education and social issues. Is another national student alliance needed at all?

Whose Issue Is It Anyway?

Part of the problem with the idea of a “national student alliance” is the fact that state and local governments control the majority of education issues. Such topics as university rules and regulations, tuition, and admissions vary from state to state and campus to campus, says Melanie Rainer, director of the Arizona Students' Association. Only a few topics can be discussed nationally, such as the Pell Grant, financial aid, and student privacy and access issues.

For this reason, some student leaders say a new national group would best serve students by strengthening state alliances so they can learn from each other and have a greater say in their state and local politics. “The only way [a national student alliance] can work effectively is if it's a loose confederation of state alliances,” says Frank

Viggiano, executive director of the **Minnesota State University Student Association**. “The cultures are so different from state to state that if we try and come up with a very strict way of doing things, you're always going to offend someone.”

Viggiano, who's worked with SGs for 25



years, says that the first step toward a national student alliance would be to make sure every state has a strong state alliance. Since the 1970s, only an average of 10 to 20 states have had well-organized lobby groups. “Part of our responsibility as an

Editor's Note: Through Student Leader's e-mail discussion list at www.studentleader.com, campus leaders engaged in a heated debate on the value of starting a new national student association, the proposed National Student Government Association of America (NSGAA). However, Student Leader, with the help of our list members, learned that the organization and its founder were not what they said they were, and we warned our members about the risk of joining. Still, the discussion was fruitful, and it led to this article.

organized state association is to go into the states that don't have a permanent organization and start them along with the students,” he says. MSUSA currently is helping to build a state alliance in North Dakota.

Connecting Across the Country

One of the primary purposes of a new national alliance would be its use as a networking tool. The ability for student leaders to access information about what other groups around the country are doing could be invaluable. One of the best ways to accomplish this is through a web site or e-mail discussion group, says Christopher Donathan, former president of the Western Student Association at **Western Michigan University**. If a student organization in Michigan is dealing with a problem, say community backlash against student drinking, it would be helpful if they could find out how other groups around the country have dealt with similar problems.

A national alliance could help bridge the gap caused by state borders by offering student leaders a forum to communicate. “A national group could better inform student groups about what they can do on the state level,” says Stacey Valentin, a recent grad of **Western Washington University** and the 2001-02 state board president of the Washington Student Lobby. “Not only could a national organization keep states apprised of national trends, it could share resources and information on topics like encouraging student turnout in elections,” she says.

Beyond just connecting student leaders and state alliances, Donathan says such an organization should

provide access to information on training and development of individual and state groups. It also can provide recognition for the work they and their members do, either by sponsoring conferences or by posting useful information on the web. Bethany

Ordaz, president of the fledgling Student Association of Missouri, a state alliance, says her group has learned much from observing the United Council of the **University of Wisconsin**, Wisconsin's state alliance. Her group would benefit from a

national organization that would let them gain resources from state alliances across the country. "There's a lot to benefit from learning how other student leaders work with their own state governments," Ordaz says.

In addition to providing an on-line forum and resource base, a national alliance could sponsor national and regional conferences. Student leaders and staff from across the nation could meet

positions nationally, a lot of them were SG leaders," he says. "We could provide a great service by allowing people an opportunity to meet each other." Since SGs commonly have tremendous turnover, having a centralized national alliance would create more "institutional memory." "It would be good to have one place where schools could get references and help that's more stable," says Fay Roepcke, Associated Students director of legislative

A Lobbying Tool

A secondary and more controversial function of a national student alliance would be as a national lobbying body. Although a few organizations, namely the United States Student Association (USSA) and the American Student Association of Community Colleges (ASACC), have stepped in to fill the role of advocate and watchdog for college students, there's still no singular student voice in the nation's capital.

Elected officials often ignore students because they don't donate much money to campaigns and only a small percentage vote, Valentin says. The average student may be unaware of issues in higher education that affects him, so a national student organization could represent his interests. "It would be detrimental and harmful for students to have no voice at the national level," says Nilda Brooklyn, former SG president at the **University of Oregon** and a current member of the Oregon Student Association. "Having a national organization gives students the opportunity to channel their energy, resources, and power behind a singular issue and speak as a unified voice."

Lauren LaRusso, president of the Douglass College Government Association of **Douglass College of Rutgers University** in New Jersey, says, "an ideal national student association would support getting young people to go out and vote with every election to make our voices louder in our national and state governments. Politicians would show a greater interest in our concerns and be more inclined to support our agenda if we show them our vote matters to their campaign." A national alliance also would influence students to get more involved in not only the federal government but also

their own campuses and communities.

Phil Clegg, ASACC executive director, says a national group should promote national issues to make sure that Congress, the president, and the administration are aware of college students' needs. "It should lobby for legislation that increases access to higher education, keeps watch of national trends, forces elected officials to be

What's Here NOW

Currently, Congress recognizes two major national student organizations—the United States Student Association (USSA) and the American Student Association of Community Colleges (ASACC). USSA represents four-year college and university students, while ASACC represents junior and community college students. A third organization, the State Student Association Alliance (SSAA), is attempting to unite statewide student associations and lobby organizations.

American Student Association of Community Colleges

With a membership of 220 community colleges, ASACC lobbies Congress to make the Pell Grant automatic for every full-time student living at or below the poverty line, and allow students to be classified as independents two years earlier than currently allowed.

ASACC also is planning the founding conference for a new four-year division, the American Student Association. Phil Clegg, ASACC executive director, says to look for this conference in 2005. "Over 600 students generally attend ASACC's community college conference in Washington, D.C., and we want to provide that opportunity for four-year colleges and universities," he says.

Dues: \$150 per school annually. If a majority of colleges within a state join, dues are \$100 per school.

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State Student Association Alliance

Created in 1998, SSAA's goal is to improve existing state student associations and develop new ones where there is substantial student interest. The current SSAA network of 35 student associations is able to share information and learn from each other. The SSAA asserts that the key to having effective student associations is having a well-trained staff. It provides training for executive directors, and national organizer staff training.

Dues: From \$200 to \$1,500, based on the state association's budget.

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United States Student Association

Founded in 1947, USSA is the nation's oldest student organization. It represents the voice of students at 200 four-year colleges and universities, such as the **University of California at Los Angeles**, the **University of Wisconsin-Madison**, and the **University of Colorado at Boulder**. USSA's goal is to expand access to education by tracking and lobbying federal legislators and organizing students to participate in the political process. It supports welfare and federal funding for

programs that increase access to education such as the Pell Grant, the supplemental educational opportunity grant (SEOG) and support services for students with disabilities. USSA also lobbies on social issues such as racial profiling, gay and lesbian rights, affirmative action, and election reform.

Dues: \$400 for schools with fewer than 1,500 students, \$2,250 for schools with at least 30,501 students. State association dues are 2.5 percent of their operating budget the first year and 5 percent for following years.

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and share time-tested methods of grassroots organizing, community outreach, fund-raising, public relations, and lobbying. Conferences often offer leadership training and present awards to top SG leaders.

Viggiano also says a national student alliance could let current student leaders learn from those who have come before. "If you look at the people in leadership

affairs at **California State University at Chico**. "I see [a national student alliance] as a place to help facilitate communication, a place for students to work on issues that the entire organization wouldn't work on, and a place for students to refine their leadership skills."



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What Could WORK

Elected Officials

One way to structure a national student alliance would be to select representatives from state SGs in each region. These representatives would form an advisory board to make decisions for the organization and elect the president and vice president. This is how both the United States Student Association (USSA) and the American Student Association of Community Colleges (ASACC) currently operate.

A national alliance would need to ensure that its officers come from different backgrounds, big and small schools, Midwest and Northwest, etc., so it represents a range of perspectives, says Stacy Valentin, the 2001-02 state board president of the Washington Student Lobby.

Candidates for president and vice president would campaign before the board of directors at the organization's national convention. This would cut down on the need for campaign spending and be more efficient than trying to conduct a true national election.

"All of the campaigning and the platforms should be laid out at the annual conference," says Phillip Clegg, ASACC executive director. "Candidates should have some time to present their ideas and views and pass out some literature, but that would be the limit of it. We wouldn't really have open campaign time for those positions. Only between 2 and 10 percent of students generally vote in an election on a campus, so opening the election to the general population would be a nightmare."

Valentin also says that the president would either have to be out of college or take a leave of absence. As WSL president, Valentin says she attended conferences on weekends and it was difficult for her to excel in school at the same time. She couldn't imagine how difficult it would be to be president of a national organization while in school. USSA lets officers run for five years after they've graduated because it's a full-time job.

Board of Directors

Another way to organize a national organization is to set it up like a business with a board of directors, vice presidents in charge of various areas, and a CEO who coordinates everything.

The CEO would be responsible for the tactical strategic structure—not what you're going to be working on but how you're going to work on things, says Sam Aborne, three-time Board of Directors member for the Associated Students at **California Polytechnic State University**. The CEO would decide how the organization lobbies, how members communicate, and what the core infrastructure of the organization will be. There would be vice presidents responsible for communication, technology, and grassroots organization. Within each one of those divisions, there would be a specialist—for example, a communications specialist or an issues specialist.

When the members identify an issue or trend in higher education that needs to be addressed, a message would be sent through the infrastructure to see who would like to work on the problem. If 10 or 15 students voiced an interest, a coordinator from within that group would head up an inquiry. The national organization would assist in a campaign by monitoring it and providing resources.

What makes this model so different is that it wouldn't be made up of students. It would be a resource for students to achieve their goals. The CEO wouldn't be a student, and possibly nor would the vice presidents, Aborne says. "What you need is an organization that will work with students but be staff-centric."

For example, California had a large tuition increase in the 1990s, Aborne says. A national organization could have put out a message to students through its infrastructure describing the problem and some possible plans of attack. The organization should provide resources for the interested students so they could "organize and mobilize," giving a large organization a "grassroots" feeling.

One important question in establishing a new national student alliance remains, however. To select an executive board that's truly representative, a majority of institutions have to be involved. But how do you recruit these schools as members without first having a board?

Christopher Donathan, former Western Student Association president at **Western Michigan University**, says a steering committee could send out letters to all state alliances outlining what the organization would do and who to contact if they're interested. From there, the committee would set up an e-mail group, discussion list, chat rooms, and a web site to connect interested students.

If an interest were there and students were willing to help, all of this could be set up quickly. The founding members would work to recruit additional school and state associations until the membership built up enough to represent a majority of schools in the nation, Donathan says.

responsible for their decisions, and creates unity between students and state student organizations."

However, because most of the decisions on education issues are made at the state level, a national student alliance would be limited on the number of topics it could champion. The Pell Grant probably is the number-one issue ASACC lobbies for because most college students from disadvantaged backgrounds can use it to finance their education, Clegg says. ASACC also is working for new legislation to give students input on student-loan interest rates and how much money is allocated to loan programs.

Where lobbying becomes a controversial issue is when a national student group begins pursuing social issues. For example, the USSA's approach includes lobbying for numerous controversial social issues, including gay and lesbian rights and affirmative action. "USSA covers a lot of great stuff, but it's more social justice than some schools are OK with," Roepcke says.

However, Julia Beatty, the 2001-02 USSA president, says that social issues are key in advocating the rights of college students. "We need to organize students to create and expand recruitment and retention programs on campus for under-represented students," she says. An ideal national student alliance must be representative of the entire student community, Beatty says, and all students must have a voice at the decision-making table and be represented in the leadership of the organization.

The problem with existing national groups is that, although they lobby on national issues, they don't represent a majority of the nation's colleges as members. "You can't claim to represent students when a good portion of student associations aren't affiliated with your group," Donathan says. If a national alliance plans to express the views of the entire student body nationwide, it'll have to contend with a wide-range of political perspectives. And getting students who are both "liberal" and "conservative" to agree on social issues will be problematic.

"People get fired up about social issues, not whether the Hope Scholarship applies to books," says Sam Aborne, three-time member of the Board of Directors for the Associated Students at **California Polytechnic State University**. "But I believe you need to create a clear, core focus of higher education, rather than being the catchall for every issue." **SL**

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