

# Tune-Up Your SG

## Six steps to a smoothly-run group

By Raoul Davis, University of Delaware

**H**ow do you define success? For Student Government, the ultimate goal is clear—serve students—but the path to achieve that goal often is intimidating because of the sheer number of projects an SG could potentially be involved with. What needs to be remembered is that there are certain steps, that when applied correctly, will make an SG effective no matter which path it takes.

### Get Off to a Fast Start

One way to eliminate student apathy is to engage students in Student Government issues and activities at the beginning of the academic year. This involves creating a vision of goals and getting early wins.

John Kotter, author of *The Eight Steps to Transformation*, says transformation isn't immediate. Organizations risk losing momentum if they don't produce short-term wins to rejoice in. Without these wins, people begin to leave the organization or become resistant to implemented changes. A short-term win can be getting a university policy changed or throwing a successful event for the student body. These short-term wins keep SG members engaged and attract interest from the student body.

### Get Involved

For SGs to effectively represent students, they first must be at the table on every issue. Every time an SG leader or a student appointee isn't on a university committee, there's a chance students' views won't be represented. Since expressing students' viewpoints is one of the main reasons why SG exists, student leaders must be at every table.

The North Carolina and Florida university systems set a standard for SG involvement in university committees. The NC Board of Governors' higher education policy for the public universities mandates that the SG presidents sit on their university Board of Trustees. Also, the administration is mandated to include SG leaders in the beginning stages of a tuition- or fees-increase policy, search committees for new university administrative personnel, and faculty senate.

### Be Representative

SG must represent all students. This means you must have a strong voter turnout, an understanding of student opinion, and an effective senate/general assembly. If only 10 percent of the student body votes in an SG election, the new officers are only representing a fraction of the students.

While newly elected SGs cannot change voting for their administration, they should make voter turnout in SG elections a

major agenda item. Chris

Cofone, assistant director of career services at **New Jersey City University**, says most students don't vote because they

don't believe SG sponsors good programs or has an impact. Switching to an on-line election system is one of the best ways to improve turnout rapidly (see *Student Leader's* comprehensive report on on-line elections at [www.studentleader.com](http://www.studentleader.com)).

Some schools, such as **Rollins College** in Florida, even maintain a mandatory voter turnout percentage for an election to be validated. The polls stay open until a certain percentage of the student body has voted.

Another way to ensure representation of students is by conducting surveys. Scientific surveys provide SG with empirical data they can take to their administration. When SG discusses student concerns related to the survey, the administration is left with less room to argue validity.

### Remain Balanced

SG must be able to balance external and internal affairs. External affairs consist of networking with peers, interacting with the community, and advocating for political issues. Networking saves SG money and time by adopting strategies from other institutions to solve a situation. Conferences bring together SG leaders from across the nation to receive vital leadership training. State associations provide regional interaction and serve as advocacy bodies for state issues.

Internal affairs are those matters that are specific to the campus. These include university committees, food service, fee increases, and programming. Students elect SG leaders to deal with problems on campus. Jonathan Ducote, president of the **University of North Carolina Association of Student Govern-**

**ment**, says SG should focus 80 percent of their energy on internal matters and 20 percent on external issues. Ducote says 10 percent of the executive staff along with members of the senate should focus their energies on external issues and give reports back to the rest of the organization.

### Maintain Consistency

Successful SGs are sustainable and set the pace for future members to succeed. Sustainability refers to an organization's ability to continually succeed. SG must train current members and formulate a transition process, which should include a transition manual, orientations, retreats, and job shadowing.

The transition manual should serve as a detailed account of the year in office including projects completed, what did and didn't work, roadblocks, and allies. Without this guide, successors two or three years down the road will run into the same obstacles and enter a cycle of stagnation.

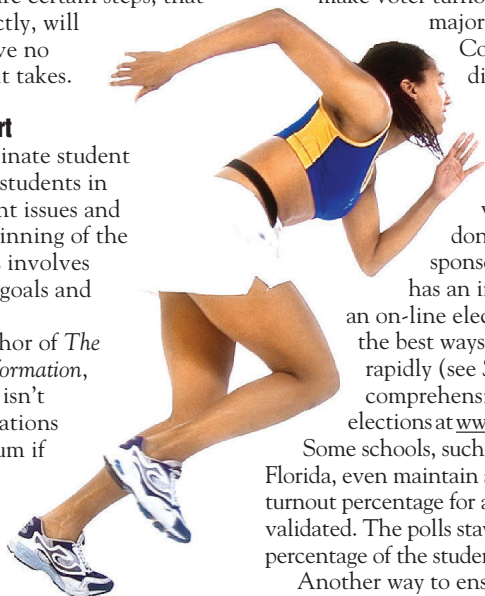
In order for SG to be effective, it must advocate for student leadership to be a major priority at the institution. For example, **DePaul University's** Student Leadership Institute (SLI) offers leadership training for freshmen and new students, customized workshops, and individual sessions. A SLI provides SG with two major advantages: the ability to spend fewer resources on leadership training and a greater interest in running for SG positions. At universities with a strong culture of student leadership, elections are often so competitive that spending caps are enforced.

### Trust Your Advisor

Since SG members rotate yearly, the most personal link from one administration to the next is the advisor. The National Association of Student Affairs Professionals (NASAP) says the advisor's role is to serve as a consultant, assist with development, offer continuity for the organization, and serve as liaison between SG and the university.

The best advisors are honest, knowledgeable, and influential on campus. SGs must have open access to their advisors and be able to trust them. Ahmed Samaha, director of student activities at the **University of South Carolina—Aiken**, says advisors realize SG is a political body that represents student views and ought to challenge SG when suitable and support

them when needed. Advisors should also have strong relationships with faculty, administration, and state-representatives. SG must have supporters at every level to be successful. **SL**



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