

At Your Service

SGs recognize their students' needs

By Risa G. Merl

Ask not what you can do for your Student Government; ask what your SG can do for you! This might sound great, but what are the chances of SGs providing real tangible benefits to their students? We're not talking about long-term projects like new buildings or policy changes but things that students can use now. The chances are greater than you

quick to lose interest." With tangible benefits, what the students are getting back is more than just the time they put into voting in SG elections. "Offering services to students is a great way to give back," says Sarah Piuunno, former Student Government Association assistant treasurer and Printshop manager at **Cleveland State University** in Ohio. "We exist because of their general fee dollars, so we owe it to them."

So, what exactly are tangible benefits?

students weren't using it—or moving it to a new location," Piuunno says. Sales tripled when it was moved next to the SGA executive board's offices. "Students responded well to this benefit. They really liked the fact that it was six cents cheaper to copy things here than anywhere else on campus," Piuunno says. "Our main focus is the Printshop and different ways to expand the resource and make it even better for the students."

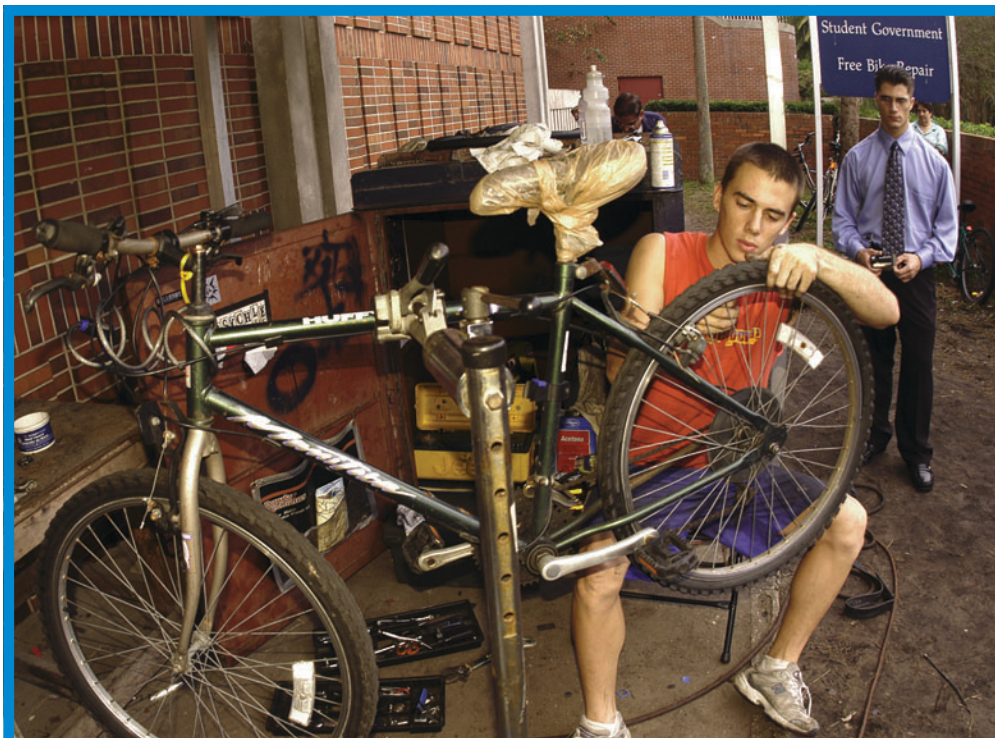
Surfing Made Easy

A tangible benefit can be much more than a student discount. The **University of Rochester's** Hive is SG's official web site and is more useful than your ordinary SG site (<http://sa.rochester.edu>). In fact, The Hive won *Student Leader's* "America's Best Student Web Site Award" for an SG in 2002 (Read the review at www.studentleader.com).

What about this web site makes it wow? "The first tangible benefit is that the students knew their direct input was going into the site," Dulong says. "This is a site developed by students, controlled by students, and dealing with student issues, so they knew whatever they asked for we'd try our best to put on the site somehow." On a typical SG site, you might find minutes from the last meeting, ways to contact the senate, and upcoming SG news. Although The Hive is home for UR's Student Association and the place to find SA information, its role isn't just that of representing SA—it's also home to the other 100 student groups.

The Hive goes above and beyond to offer UR students a place for everything they may possibly need, whether it be e-mail access, local weather reports, information on local events, or current campus news. "We wanted one site where it's a 'one-stop shopping location.' You're on The Hive, where everything should be," Dulong says.

The site has a comprehensive current events calendar, which didn't exist on any other UR site before The Hive. Through its, "What can your SG do for you?" section, students can comment on how the SG is doing or request new services. The feedback system has been very successful due to the anonymity. The site also has world, national, and campus headline news. "For campus news, we post events that benefit the entire student body," Dulong says. The campus news also informs students of big events on campus, such as concerts and speakers, or the less exciting tuition



Robert Newsom, a junior in mechanical engineering at the University of Florida, mends a tire at the Student Government's Bike Repair Shop. This free service for students is paid for with funds from UF's SG.

think. At schools across the country, SGs are recognizing the short-term needs of their students and providing them with benefits that matter, and get students involved in, and make them appreciate SG—finally.

Give and You Shall Receive

Providing tangible benefits to students isn't just a nice thing to do or a way to get reelected; it's fundamental to running a successful SG. "Tangible benefits make people feel like they're getting something back," says Daryl Dulong, creator of "The Hive," the SG's web site at the **University of Rochester** in New York. "If SG only offered policy changes and new regulations, the student body would be very

Different SGs offer an array of beneficial programs. The keys to a successful program are creativity, usability, and immediacy—make sure it's a program that the students can use today.

A cash discount is a common benefit that's highly successful when used in a creative way. Through its Printshop, CSU offered low cost printing and photocopy services to its students. Just how low? How about only four cents a page for copies and a plethora of other discounted printing needs such as banners, posters, and flyers. Any student, faculty, or staff member could make use of these discounts.

But the Printshop wasn't always a successful tangible benefit. "The decision was between closing the Printshop—

increases. "If you're going to the site to check out the weather or log onto your e-mail, you might as well be able to find out what's going on, too," he says.

Knowledge Is Power

Providing knowledge is always a worthy student benefit. At **Miami Dade College North Campus**, the SGA does just that through knowledge a book donation program. Having textbooks available for students to use in the library was part of the SGA administration's campaign. "We had the idea for the administrators on campus to buy the textbooks as a form of donation and placed them in the library," says Jerry Huson, former SGA president. "Anyone can donate a book, but it's a program that's focused between the administration and the SGA to help the students." They started out last spring with 32 textbooks on two shelves. The first shelf is at the circulation desk, which has the high-demand textbooks. There is a two-hour usage limit for the books, and students must have their MDC school ID to access them. The other books on the reference shelf are in less demand, so students can use them freely.

Last spring, MDC also initiated a system to monitor use of the high-demand books. As of then, Huson reported 12 to 15 people using the books per day. "Word of mouth has been really great." As a student who used textbooks in the library because he couldn't afford books of his own, Huson knows how important this benefit is to students. "General feedback from students is that the program has been a great help," he says. High textbook prices were a major issue at MDC, and the book donation program has been a great resource to solve that problem. "We have less students complaining about the textbook price issue," he says.

The program not only helps students to save money, but at the same time, it encourages students to visit the library more often. "This is a program that could work anywhere. It's not limited by space or tradition; it could work on all campuses," Huson says. "It saves money and encourages students to study. I hope more colleges adopt programs like this one."

Aviate, Navigate, Communicate

At the **University of Michigan**, airBus is more than your ordinary school transportation system. It doesn't take students to their apartments or a late-night hot spot, but instead it takes them to the airport for a minimal fee. AirBus provided over 2,600 rides last year alone. The university hosts a diverse student population and the Detroit Metropolitan Airport sits 20 miles east of campus. "There's a huge demand for travel between campus and the airport at all times, but even more so at break times," says Neil Greenberg,

airBus service developer and UM student. Despite the campus' proximity to the airport, there had never been a practical, economical mode of transportation for students. "We launched airBus as an immediate solution to an immediate need," Greenberg says. "We charter buses from a local charter firm and run them to and from Metro."

AirBus started by charging \$9 one-way and \$14 round-trip, but lowered prices to \$7 for one-way and \$12 round-trip.

Give Students What They Want

Other schools offer resources of great use to their students. Here are some examples from across the country.

■ The **University of Florida's** SG keeps its student body mobile by providing them with free bike repair. <http://sg.ufl.edu>.

■ **Grossmont College** in California raises money by charging students for the use of a card that gives them discounts on local businesses and admission to concerts and speakers on campus. www.grossmont.net/asgc.

■ The **University of Illinois** provides a comprehensive teacher evaluation site right on its SG web site. The evaluations cover every subject and teacher and are detailed in categories such as workload, instructor's effectiveness, and fairness of grading. www.isg.uiuc.edu/eval.

■ The SGA at the **University at Buffalo** in New York brings distinguished speakers such as former Sen. Bill Bradley and popular comedians such as Jay Leno and Dave Chappelle to the school and charges students half price. SGA also sponsors a discounted spring break getaway each year. SGA plans the trip—all the students have to do is sign up. www.sa.buffalo.edu.

■ **Lamar University** in Texas also offers a discount program. "Big Red Benefits" is a partnership with local businesses that provides discounts for students and free advertising for the businesses. <http://dept.lamar.edu/studentaffairs>.

■ At the **University of Cincinnati**, SG sponsors "Hot Chocolate Fridays" during the winter. SG sets up a booth in a high traffic area on campus and hands out free Starbucks hot chocolate to students. SG uses the opportunity to pass out flyers about upcoming events and to talk to students about what they want to see done differently at UC. Students get a chance to warm up with hot chocolate and warm up to their SG representatives. www.studentgov.uc.edu.

"Compare this to \$22 one-way for a shuttle van or up to \$45 one-way for a taxi cab," he says. AirBus operates trips at targeted common travel times and uses full-size highway coaches. Their busiest trips carry as many as 57 passengers. "With multiple airBus trips per day, we can move a lot more people a lot more efficiently," Greenberg says. "And since profit isn't our motive, we can do it for a lot less." The service is publicized on campus and customers can reserve seats on a first-come, first-serve basis.

Last year's leaders of the Michigan Students' Association ran with the proposal for airBus on their campaign platforms and followed through to bring airport transportation to fellow students. MSA provided the resources to publicize airBus to students. "The program has been wildly successful," Greenberg says. "Of the 41 reserved trips, we had 30 sold out completely. We had to upgrade to larger buses and regrettably turn some people away." In fact, the program is so popular that he says some students recognize him in-person as the "airBus guy." "This is a resource that everyone can use," Greenberg says.

Coming Soon to a School Near You

The best way to start a tangible benefit program is to find out about the real needs of your students. "You need to survey your students and see what they would like," CSU's Pionno says. "If there's a need for something, such as a print shop, you can find that out by talking to your students and getting a feel for the campus." UR's Dulong agrees that identifying a need or problem on campus is the best way to develop a new tangible benefit. "If you can identify a specific problem and then get a couple of people together to think of ways to fix that problem, the end result will most likely be amazing," he says. "The birth of The Hive was that students at the time were coming to senate meetings and actually asking for something to keep them better informed."

The key to keeping a program alive also comes from students. "We've taken a lot of feedback from the student body and have made a lot of changes. We're constantly making 'The Hive' better," Dulong says. Pionno also knows the importance of listening to the students, who also are her customers. "As manager, I listen to all comments and suggestions and take them to my committee. We discuss them and see what's possible. If it's not possible for us to do, we try to figure out another department that would be possible to get that done," she says. AirBus used student feedback to make sure that the program was fulfilling the needs of its customers. "We actively sought feedback from our customers," Greenberg says. "We've established a pretty good recipe for operating smoothly, but we're always open to input."

"There will always be attempts to start new programs, and many new programs are resurrections of older ones that had died out," Dulong says. "Until the perfect program is found, I don't think there will ever be a slowdown of new attempts." There may be some trial and error before the right program is found, but providing students with tangible benefits is an effort that serves not only the student body, but the SG as well. **SL**



For links to all the SGs mentioned, see expanded coverage at studentleader.com.