

# Test Your Administrators II

## You took the quiz—now what?

By Chris Jachimowicz

In the winter 2003 issue of *Student Leader*, you assessed your Student Government's relationship with administrators by using the "Test Your Administrators" quiz. Hopefully, that tool gave you a good idea of where your SG stands with "The Big A"—your administrators. The question you probably have now is, "Where do we go from here?"

When you completed the test, your numerical total correlated to one of six administrative style categories ranging from "No Regard" (the worst) to "Collaborative" (the best). Now, check out the following steps you can take to climb up the SG/Administration relationship ladder.

### No Regard (0 to 11 points)

If your total was this low, you either borrowed this magazine from another school or bought it yourself. Your administration certainly wouldn't have paid for the subscription; it doesn't even recognize the need for SG. Don't despair. If your institution allows student clubs and organizations, there's still hope for SG.

First and foremost, talk with your fellow students. Make sure to extend yourself beyond your regular circle of friends, gathering ideas and support from every student constituency. Have a vision in mind of what SG should look like and how it should operate.

Secondly, find members of the faculty and staff who are sympathetic to your mission. Discuss with them the need for a representative student voice. Gauge their interest in serving as the group's advisor (most schools *require* that a member of the faculty or staff serve as an advisor). Invite either high-ranking administrators or well-tenured faculty members to take on this role. The better connected they are, the more credibility your cause will have.

Finally, begin to write and submit the documents required by your institution for recognition. Since you're going to actually represent all students, circulate a petition supporting the creation of the group among the student body. Do this regardless of whether or not such a petition is required for recognition. By getting a majority of the student body to indicate its support, you'll demonstrate that the group is in touch with students.

One word of caution: Avoid challenging your school's balance of power and decision-

making structure. Remember, the institution has gotten along just fine without your help.

### Managed Control (12 to 25 points)

You're making some headway as a recognized campus group, but the administration probably treats your meetings like a kindergarten class—you're expected to listen attentively as an administrator tells you what's been decided and how it'll be good for all students. This style calls for very slow and deliberate moves. Remember, Rome wasn't built in a day and an effective SG won't be either.



Begin by cultivating stronger relationships with key administrators. Work on gaining an open-door policy, which allows you to follow up decision-making announcements with appropriately phrased questions. Your goals should be learning the "why" of decisions and expressing interest in "how" the institution works. Ask more questions and provide less of your opinion. You won't be able to reverse decisions that have been announced, since the implementation of that decision most likely is already in the works. There are reasons why administrators treat you as they do. Take the time to find out why.

As you're gathering information, start using it to anticipate the decisions that'll be announced. Spend time in closed sessions generating appropriate questions to ask at your next meeting. Your interest will pay dividends as administrators come to realize that some students might be mature enough to handle adult decisions.

Focus your group inward, building up the structure and procedure that'll serve you well as the organization progresses. Having good practices in

place now will ensure that your group can handle decisions maturely and effectively once you finally get the chance to make some.

### Parental Approach (26 to 50 points)

While style differs only minutely from Managed Control, this difference signals a significant development for SG. Unlike the previous style, Parental Approach administrations are interested in the students' opinions—so long as they're in agreement with the administration. Take heart though; this slight opening can be widened through cautious maneuvering.

Many Parental Approach SGs struggle to express their opinions without inflaming personalities in the administration. One non-threatening approach is to phrase your SG's opinion in the form of a resolution.

Outline the reasoning behind a decision followed by your action based on that reasoning. By using a resolution, your SG can go on record with an official opinion without appearing to challenge the decision itself. Such efforts also prompt the administration to start seeking your input *before* making some decisions.

Remember to use resolutions to support good decisions as well. This is an often-overlooked step in building positive administrative relationships.

Parental Approach also presents a key opportunity to make some gains for your organization. The administration is comfortable with you "playing" at governance; they just won't let you participate. Now is the time to ask for some material gains such as office space and money for training. Because neither of these directly affects your governance but contributes to your "playing," your requests have a better chance of being approved. Don't just march into the president's office and demand space, though. Start with a list of problems that could be solved



by having space. For instance, mention that constituents have a difficult time locating representatives to voice concerns or that you miss important phone calls because you have

to receive them at home. When you present your grievance list to the president, ask him for potential solutions. If the space idea doesn't come up, you can contribute to the problem-solving session yourself by suggesting it.

Remember, at this point you still have no power to speak of. Making demands of the administration will only get you sent to your room.

### Public Relations (51 to 75 points)

The Public Relations style marks a turning point for SGs. When the school's public relations department feels your work is noteworthy enough to share with the public, you've gained a foothold in campus governance. Until now, you probably haven't had a voice in decision making. In fact, SG's participation probably has been treated as a formality rather than a real part of the decision-making process. Because the administration wants to promote an SG that's involved in campus issues but is wary about exactly what issues SG debates, start small. You may remember from *Student Leader's* "Test Your Administrators" quiz that student life issues have a tendency to be the least politicized and are therefore deferred to SG. Don't turn up your nose at this opportunity. While you won't be approving tuition increases next year, you can still control some aspects of the school. Now's the time to show the administration what you can do.

Organize committees to review the issues, conduct exhaustive research (surveys, polls, forums, etc.), and take advantage of those open-door policies you cultivated earlier. Ensure that your SG knows how to debate issues and how to conduct votes. Most importantly, keep the administration informed about your progress throughout. Show them that you take even the "drudge" work seriously.

Keep in mind that even after all of your research and professionalism, the administration may still make the decision itself. If this happens, ask for a meeting to discuss exactly what role the SG is playing. Are you expected to render decisions or opinions? If the SG still isn't in the decision-making loop, ask what committee or department makes the decision, and then request that an SG representative be placed on that committee—even if it's just as an observer.

Finally, always be aware that the school's interest in the SG as a media tool can be a double-edged sword. Well-organized SGs can focus negative attention on the school just as easily as they can be a source of positive press. However, you must be very cautious in playing the negative

press card, especially if you don't have the majority of the student body behind you. It would be very embarrassing to organize a protest and have only the SG executive board show up.

### Consumer Relations (76 to 95 points)

This style is typified by an administration that really wants to hear what the students have to say. Unfortunately, while administrators want to hear from students, the SG may not be officially included in the decision-making process. With

Public Relations, you were encouraged to seek out the soft student life issues. With Consumer Relations, the SG most likely controls the student life issues either through deferred power (no one else wants it) or delegated power (it belongs to someone else, but it's been delegated to the

#### Stop!

#### You Haven't Taken the Test?

Your Student Government will get a lot more out of this evaluation after having taken the quiz. If you missed it in last winter's issue, go to [www.studentleader.com](http://www.studentleader.com) and click on "Back Issues", which is located in the left margin under "Special Services." You'll find the "Test Your Administrators" quiz by scrolling down to the winter 2003 issue. Answering these 11 questions is the first step towards strengthening your relationship with the Administration.

SG). Now, it's time to work on getting student representatives placed on the important, decision-making committees. Request a list of such committees from the president's office. Then, begin politicking for representatives. Just as in Public Relations, even if the representative is merely an observer, the SG has gotten one step closer to the actual power. Recognize that some committees, such as faculty tenure, are private for good reason. Respect the need for privacy in some areas and push for involvement in others that directly affect students.

Because Consumer Relations also is about comparisons, raise the issue of leadership development by surveying similar institutions who pay for such activities. You can make a case that your main competitor funds SG leadership development from the school's budget—as opposed to the SG's budget—and that your school should do the same if it wants to remain competitive. Remember that many SGs attract students who participated in similar activities in high school. Often, these students were at the top of their classes. What college wouldn't want to do more to attract such qualified students?

### Collaborative (96 to 100 points)

Congratulations! If you're in the Collaborative group, you can count yourself among the most elite and influential SGs in America. So, what possibly could there be to do when you're firing on all cylinders? A lot, actually.

Just like any championship team, getting there isn't nearly as tough as staying there. Turnover within an organization from semester to semester may mean significant changes in executives as well as representatives. For top SGs, your focus needs to be on consistency. Make sure the next leadership team is fully informed about the position SG has on all issues, the outlook of all outstanding debates, the allies they can count on in the administration and other student groups, and the people to avoid. The chances of success for the next leadership team depend on the strength of the legacy that each SG administration leaves behind. If sweeping changes of opinion and action or a lack of understanding as to where issues were left mark the officer transition, you'll find the administration distancing itself.

Having a strong transition process in place is the first step to maintaining a healthy relationship with the administration. The second step is to ensure that you keep accurate and complete minutes at each SG meeting. Minutes are a goldmine of information on what issues were discussed, as well as what's been previously decided. There's nothing more frustrating to a less-than-friendly administrator than believing that the troublesome SG administration is finally gone—only to see the next leadership team pick up the same issues without missing a beat.

When faced with administrative roadblocks, stop and think about why the administration would act in such a way. As you begin to understand administrative logic, you'll also begin to develop "work-arounds" for the current challenge. **SL**

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