

# We the Students...

## Choose the structure that's right for you

By Chris Donathan

Whether you're writing a new document from scratch or looking to revamp your current one, drafting a new Student Government constitution isn't easy. It took four months to write the United States Constitution, and, of course, the Founding Fathers weren't taking classes or working part-time jobs. Then again, they were creating a completely unique document without access to computers and the internet to make researching and writing it easier.

SGs vary from school to school, but most SG structures fall into two general categories: a Unicameral System or a Parliamentary System.

### Know the Terms

A Unicameral System is similar to the U.S. government, both having three branches: executive, legislative, and judicial. However, most SGs only have a senate in their legislative branch. The executive branch generally consists of a popularly elected president and vice president and possibly other elected or appointed positions. The legislative branch typically consists of elected representatives from various constituencies across campus (academic colleges and/or student groups), and is led by a speaker and committee chairs elected from its own membership. Members of the judicial branch are often appointed by the president and confirmed by the legislature.

In a Parliamentary System, similar to Great Britain's government, the executive and legislative branches are combined into one general assembly. The president and vice president are still typically popularly elected, but now the president presides over the legislature. Committee chairs are elected from within its own membership. A parliamentary system may include a separate judicial system, or it may be incorporated into the general assembly.

### Pros and Cons

So, which system is best? According to Brent R. Gobler, an SG senator at **Western Michigan University**, the checks and balances built into a unicameral system provide a safeguard against bad legislation. "Everything is double- or even triple-checked before it makes it through," he says.

On the other hand, a parliamentary system "is easier to use because you're not worrying about things going through separate houses," says Jason Mironov,

student general counsel at the **University of Michigan**. As a result, Mironov says the parliamentary system is more responsive than a unicameral system.

What about the case of an "outsider" president? In a popular election, it's possible for a person who's never been involved in SG and has no knowledge of parliamentary procedure to be elected president. If the SG is a parliamentary system, prepare for a difficult year. A unicameral structure, however, puts an outsider president under a little less pressure. "The senate is separate, so if the president makes a mistake, it may not impact the senate as much," Gobler says.

On the other hand, having both a president and a speaker can make it unclear who's really in charge. A conflict between the two can easily divide the organization, destroying productivity in the process. This happened at WMU when two rivals ran for student body president. One was elected, and so his opponent ran for and was elected speaker. The two feuded throughout the following year, and the SG was nearly deadlocked.

### Other Options

For some schools, particularly smaller ones, a custom approach may be more useful.

According to Christy Melton, SG secretary at the 800-student **Centenary College of Louisiana**, the SG's main focus is distributing student fees. Each class elects four senators, and the entire campus elects a five-member executive council. The 21-member SG votes on funding issues and also forms internal (elected member) and external (open to other students and faculty) committees to focus on specific policy issues.

Other systems, such as the Campus Coalition Government at **Indian River Community College** in Florida, use an "advisory board" where representatives from student clubs and organizations serve as SG delegates. The student body usually elects the executive board, with candidates first being selected from among the different campus groups. Each campus group also holds its own internal election to select a representative to serve as an SG delegate in the senate.

With any SG, the most effective structure depends on the mission of the organization. An SG that's focused on hosting campus programs and services likely will be organized

very differently than a SG that debates policy decisions affecting the student body.

### Putting It Down on Paper

To avoid the problems that result from a poorly written constitution, here are some critical steps:

#### ■ Start early and don't rush the process.

Like a term paper, writing a good constitution isn't something you can accomplish over a weekend and five pots of coffee.

#### ■ Think first about the role and purpose of the SG on your campus.

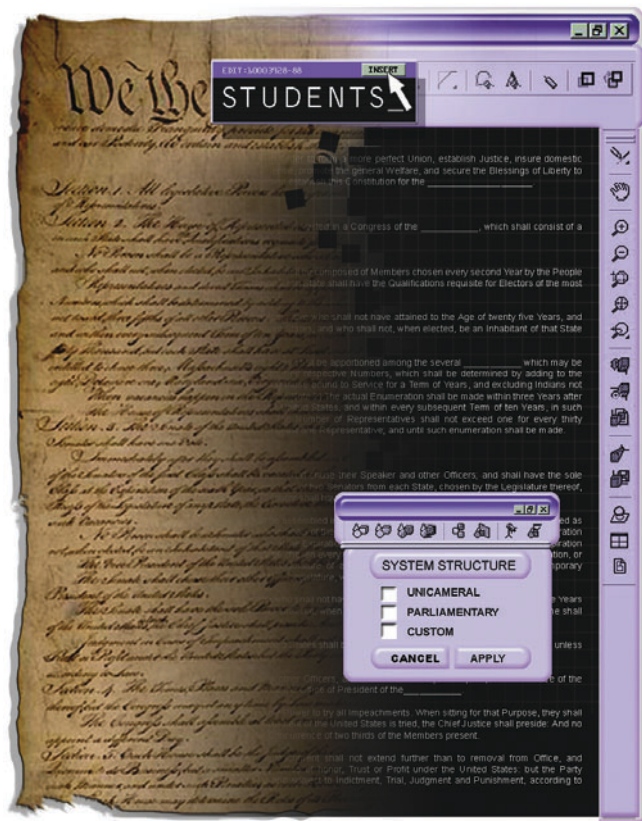
Define your organization before you write the constitution; don't let the constitution define you.

#### ■ Do your homework.

Research the constitutions of other SGs and even other organizations at your university.

#### ■ Learn from your predecessors.

Talk with past SG presidents. They'll be able to tell



you what frustrated them about the constitution and what they wish had been different about it.

#### ■ Get help.

Ask the university's legal staff and faculty in the political science department to review your work before you put it to a vote.

With a little luck and a lot of work, you should soon have a constitution that'll function as a clear set of guidelines for your organization and enable you to focus less on debating your own rules and more on serving the students you represent. **SL**

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