

# Test Your Administrators

## Find out just how SG-friendly they are

By Chris Jachimowicz

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**E**ffective governance on most college campuses hinges on a positive relationship between Student Government and “The Big A,” administration. If the administration shuts you out of all decisions, it’s next to impossible to serve your constituents. If the administration sees you as an equal partner in governance, your SG better meet expectations and deliver the goods. By taking Student Leader’s “SG Effectiveness Test” at [www.studentleader.com](http://www.studentleader.com), you’ll find out whether or not you’re doing your job. Now, it’s time to find out how your administrators are doing at their jobs.

### 1. Seeks SG input on important issues.

Usually, it’s easy for SG to have input on issues such as parking or food service. Administrators defer to SG because the issues are perceived as “Student Life” issues and therefore are “appropriate” for student debate. But how many meaty issues is SG consulted on? The nature and importance of the issues shared with your SG are significant markers of how friendly your administration is. Student Life issues usually are less significant when viewed in “the big picture.”

“I kept them on their toes, respectfully of course, so that if they made a decision without talking to me about it first, they would know I would find out and

make a stink all the way up the chain of command,” says Ken Kruger, 2001-02 student body president at the **University of New Hampshire**. “This proved to be helpful during budget talks, new construction, parking issues, environmental policies, etc.

“For this process to work well, a solid rapport with administrators must be forged. In the first weeks of my presidency, I met everyone and I presented my goals and expectations of what I would like to see and my expectations on how often we should talk,” Kruger says.

Now, consider the following: When your SG makes decisions regarding a Student Life issue, have the decisions been honored? If not, then your administration is a long way from sharing any real power with you.

**TOP SCORE: 10 points**  
**YOUR ADMIN’S SCORE \_\_\_\_\_**

### 2. Supports leadership training with money.

Many schools promote the idea of leadership development, but does your school support the practice with institutionally budgeted dollars? Many SGs are expected to financially support their own leadership development. To make it worse, the administration sometimes touts such programs in PR materials as part of “their” developmental programs for students.

Most schools support professional development for staff and faculty with institutional funds. In the

same way, the administration should support development of student leaders, a philosophy that serves both the institution and SG. The institution is assured that such training will continue, thereby providing better leaders, continued marketing, and perhaps more appreciative alumni. SG benefits from improved resources, better leaders, and more money to spend on other student issues.

**TOP SCORE: 5 points**  
**YOUR ADMIN’S SCORE \_\_\_\_\_**

### 3. Aids the installation of new SG officers.

In his book, *Campus Life: In search of community*, Ernest Boyer offers six principles of community. The sixth is “a celebrative community...one in which the heritage of the institution is remembered and where rituals affirming both tradition and change are widely shared.” An SG-friendly administration extends this concept to student organization rituals and functions as well.

Is your administration even aware of when your officers transition? Have you ever received a congratulatory call or note after your election?

When a new college president is inaugurated, it’s a pretty big deal. Representatives from other institutions across the country come to participate in this time-honored tradition. Attendance shows respect for the office as well as the officer.

Maybe the inauguration of a new SG president doesn’t warrant as much pageantry, but it should be important enough to have key administrators in attendance. If you currently have a transition ceremony and invited administrators don’t attend, they may be telling you something about your organization’s importance by “voting with their feet.”

**TOP SCORE: 5 points**  
**YOUR ADMIN’S SCORE \_\_\_\_\_**

### 4. Has an open-door policy.

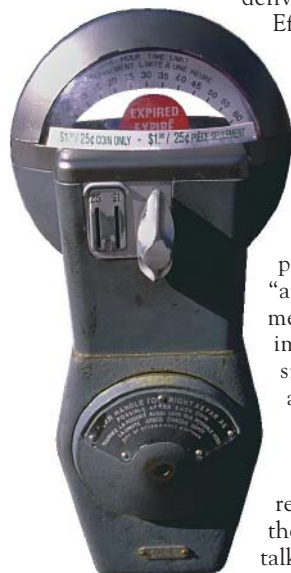
If you work with administrators who always are willing to stop what they’re doing and listen, count yourself among the very fortunate.

Some administrators view visits from student leaders like trips to the dentist—something to be avoided at all costs, and if they’re lucky, only occurring twice a year. Let’s face it; not everyone who works at a college necessarily likes working with students. Colleges are businesses, and many administrators are hired for their business skills and not for their ability to get along with students.

Knowing that, student leaders must work hard at approaching administrators in the most business-like fashion possible. Call ahead for an appointment, be well prepared to discuss the topic at hand, and dress professionally. Doing this time and again will put those hard-to-reach administrators more at ease and lead to a real open-door policy.

If you’re doing this and are still met with cancelled meetings or brush-offs to other administrators “down the line,” it’s a pretty clear signal that there’s little desire to work with you.

**TOP SCORE: 10 points**  
**YOUR ADMIN’S SCORE \_\_\_\_\_**



## 5. Ensures students a spot on college committees.

Is your SG required to provide a representative for standing college committees? On many college campuses, it's these institutional committees that make recommendations regarding both academic and Student Life policies. These committees most often are comprised of faculty, staff, and occasionally, students. This is where the real power and influence is!

Student representation and involvement can vary from being an observer to being a valued member with full and equal voting rights. The level of student participation permitted is a good indication of how SG-friendly your administration is.

Many institutions don't seat students on committees because students, even campus leaders, often blow off meetings or show up unprepared or late. If you expect to gain more respect from your administration, you must be represented on every college committee.

**TOP SCORE: 10 points**  
**YOUR ADMIN'S SCORE** \_\_\_\_\_

## 6. Includes SG in finance issues.

Money and finances are difficult subjects for everyone. If your SG isn't getting the complete story from administrators, it may mean they don't trust you.

Certain issues are sensitive to individuals and departments. It's difficult to judge whether student leaders will treat information with the discretion necessary to keep from hurting feelings or violating certain confidentiality.

Also, students may be viewed as consumers who purchase the product of "education." There are things that the "education makers" think students shouldn't know, sort of like the Wizard of Oz hiding behind the screen. Knowing that it was just a bald guy in a green suit takes some of the effectiveness out of his fiery projection.

Finally, your administration may feel that it's just plain none of your business. They don't view SG as a necessary stop in the decision-making process and perhaps won't even consider the possibility of sharing information.

**TOP SCORE: 10 points**  
**YOUR ADMIN'S SCORE** \_\_\_\_\_

## 7. Respects SG's decisions.

When your SG makes a decision or recommendation, does the administration accept the outcome, or do you find your work constantly ignored or overruled?

Some administrators are only interested in having SGs "play" at governance. They get themselves into trouble by not being honest with SG about the limitations of their role. When the unsuspecting SG makes a decision they're justified to make, it should be put up or shut up time for the administration. In many cases, the administration simply ignores the request or tosses out excuses why it can't be accommodated. Such mixed messages make any SG ineffectual and unmotivated.

On the other hand, if the



administration is always receptive to your decisions, then good for you! On some level, your administration values SG for the content of the decisions it makes and not just the image it creates.

**TOP SCORE: 10 points**  
**YOUR ADMIN'S SCORE** \_\_\_\_\_

## 8. Balances expectations of responsibility with education.

SGs are about "learning by doing."

Some of the greatest learning comes from making mistakes. Unfortunately, mistakes made in governing a university have real-world effects. Knowing that mistakes can be costly and time-consuming, not every administration is comfortable with the concept of "shared governance."

How the administration balances education and responsibility is not entirely an internal decision. Consider today's economy: a falling stock market, sluggish sales, fewer jobs. Unless your SG runs at top efficiency all the time, the administration may not feel it has the luxury to be educationally focused when it comes to governance.

The task for SG is to build up trust with the administration—trust that you can deal with issues quickly and effectively, as well as trust that you understand the real-world impact of your decisions.

**TOP SCORE: 10 points**  
**YOUR ADMIN'S SCORE** \_\_\_\_\_

## 9. Provides adequate space for SG offices.

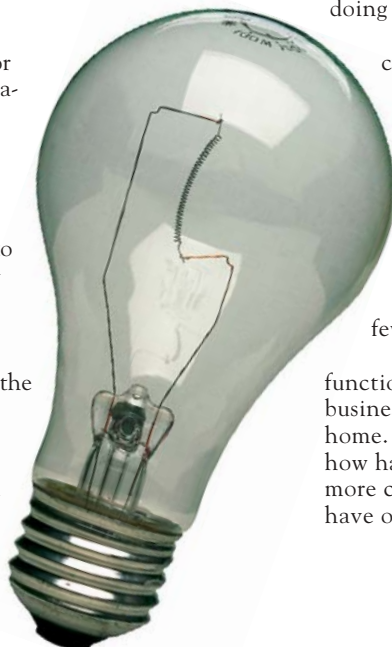
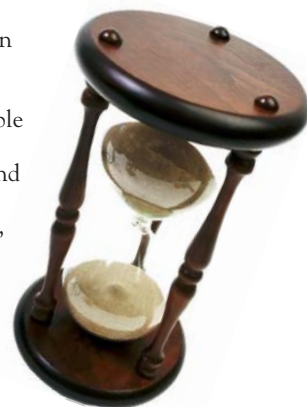
Are your offices in a meeting room or a closet? On most college campuses, space is at a premium. An SG-friendly administration will take the time to understand the space needs of your organization

and will work to meet those needs. This may require some compromise on your part (like not getting a hot tub or swimming pool). Evaluate your current space and determine if it adequately meets your needs. If it does, and space has never been a divisive issue, then your administration is doing pretty well in this category.

On the other hand, if your current space isn't large enough, you should consider approaching the administration for assistance. "A fellow student leader inquired into the possibility of getting an office for our group," says Stephen Roberts, co-chair of SPECTRUM at **Kent State University, Stark Regional Campus** in Ohio. "The administrator promised to look into the situation. Although our request was denied, as there's just not enough physical space on campus, we found out within a few weeks."

Most college administrators expect your organization to function like a business. To do this, you need to look like a business, and that means having a place for your SG to call home. Use these concepts to form a business plan that explains how having an office space will make SG more effective. The more convincing your presentation, the better chance you have of gaining adequate space.

**TOP SCORE: 10 points**  
**YOUR ADMIN'S SCORE** \_\_\_\_\_





## 10. Treats student leaders as colleagues.

Theoretical physicist David Bohm developed a theory and method of “dialogue.” He asserted that it was through dialogue that a group could achieve a whole greater than the sum of its parts. One of the three basic conditions for dialogue was that all participants needed to view each other as colleagues in search of mutually beneficial goals and insights. Unless colleagueship is established between SG and the administration, it’s impossible to create a positive environment that fosters deeper understanding.

An SG-friendly administration treats student leaders as colleagues. Student leaders and members of the administration should focus on mutual goals and needs. This relationship is as rare in education as it is in business. Nonetheless, organizations that have accomplished this feat are more effective.

Still, there are many administrators who don’t feel that student leaders are mature enough to be regarded as colleagues. These administrators are condescending in their approach to dealing with student leaders. Their self-perception is that they hold all the knowledge and a student leader is merely a vessel to be filled.

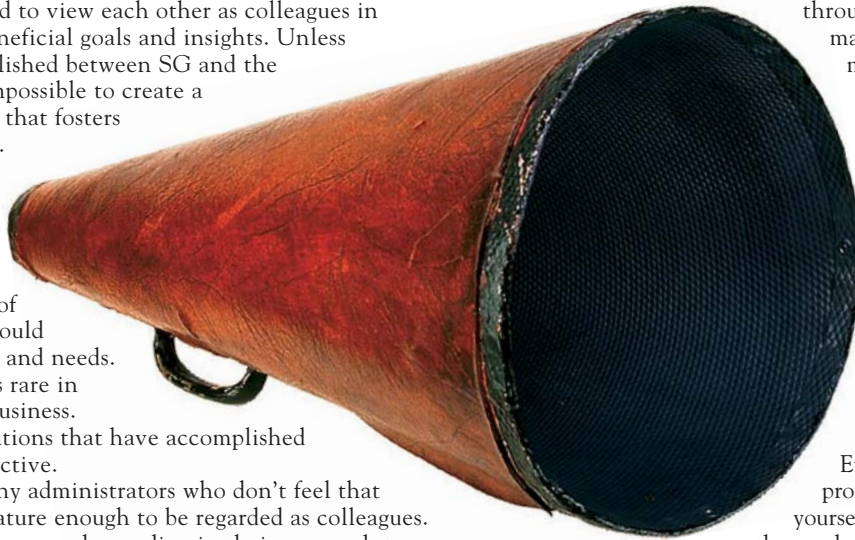
**TOP SCORE: 10 points**  
**YOUR ADMIN’S SCORE** \_\_\_\_\_

## 11. Publicizes SG activities.

People always want to share news about activities that they’re particularly proud of. College administrations are no different. They share good news with alumni, parents, faculty and staff, and prospective students through newsletters, alumni magazines, web pages, and marketing materials. If your SG has done something particularly noteworthy, has the administration been willing to share it with an external audience? If so, then your administration scores well in this characteristic.

On many campuses, however, the achievements of SG go unnoticed by the outside world. Even if you take the time to promote achievements yourself, the average SG lacks the mechanisms and the market to make the effort worthwhile. Why is this important? If the administration feels that what you do is noteworthy, it’s another way of telling that you’re valued.

**TOP SCORE: 10 points**  
**YOUR ADMIN’S SCORE** \_\_\_\_\_



## What’s Your Admin’s Score?

Before tallying your score, *Student Leader* recommends asking several members of your organization, including officers, senators, committee leaders, and even volunteers, to take this test. We also suggest asking the editor of your campus newspaper, one of your student affairs administrators, and your advisor to participate. Then, you can average the scores for each question and get a true picture of your administration’s effectiveness.

Administrative styles\* run the gamut from “no support” to “full collaboration.” Lower scores reflect administrations that value SG largely for its form rather than content.

While this survey is hardly scientific, it’ll hopefully provide you with a starting place to discuss the support of your administration.

### SCORE: 0 to 11

#### ADMINISTRATION’S STYLE: “No Regard”

Your administration doesn’t support the concept of SG. Some administrators may still hold to a philosophy of “in place of your parents” management. Under this style, administrators set the rules and students are expected to follow them or they’re punished. Even in the most supportive environments, it’s not uncommon to find individuals who still subscribe to this style.

### SCORE: 12 to 25

#### ADMINISTRATION’S STYLE: “Managed Control”

Your administration treats you much as a parent treats a teenager. Student opinions are fine, but they must be expressed under the appropriate conditions. It’s unlikely that your organization will be given any decision-making power. If students were empowered to make their own decisions, they would only embarrass the institution. You’ll be told of decisions, and how they are good for you, after the fact.

### SCORE: 26 to 50

#### ADMINISTRATION’S STYLE: “Parental Approach”

In this administrative style, students are allowed to have an opinion so long as it’s in agreement with the administrative opinion. Or as Henry Ford said, “You can have any color car you want, so long as it’s

black.” While students have the right to organize and offer “opinions,” it’s still the institution that knows what’s in the best interests of its students. SG is viewed as an opportunity for students to “play” government.

### SCORE: 51 to 75

#### ADMINISTRATION’S STYLE: “Public Relations”

Administrations of this type view the work of SG as important only inasmuch as it improves the image of the institution. In other words, it looks good to have a Student Government, but there are concerns over what issues SG will take up. This institutional style is concerned with process over content.

### SCORE: 76 to 95

#### ADMINISTRATION’S STYLE: “Consumer Relations”

This type treats SG as a marketing tool. First, SG provides the institution with a “focus group” of customers who can give immediate feedback about the educational product. Secondly, SG is viewed as a necessary organization to remain competitive with other educational institutions. Many of the issues put before SG will be about satisfying the customer. This occurs most often with Student Life issues.

### SCORE: 96 to 100

#### ADMINISTRATION’S STYLE: “Collaborative”

In a collaborative institution, SG is viewed as a partner in the educational process. As a stakeholder in education, SG is held equally accountable for results. Student input is expected on all institutional decisions.

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\*McKaig, Dr. Richard N. Policello, Dr. Sharon M. *The Institutional Context: Student Government as a part of institutional governance*. In Torok, Tricia Nolfi (Ed.) *Advising Student Governments: Models for Practice and Strategies for Success*, pp. 1-12. Columbia, South Carolina, NACA Educational Foundation.