



**FIRE**  
STUDENT  
NETWORK



Guide to Working With Your  
Student Government  
on Free Speech



# So You Want To Work With Your Student Government on Free Speech

Most colleges and universities in the United States have some form of student government that often serves as a forum for student issues, funding allocation, and activity planning, and as a liaison for student affairs administrators.

For many students, interacting with student government leaders can be intimidating. However, if you seek to affect change on campus, working with student governments can be one of the best tools at your disposal. Student governments usually have access to monthly administrative meetings, Regents or Trustees, and thousands of dollars of funding. Working with students who hold administration-facing leadership positions can provide the access and influence you need to bolster free expression on your campus.



# Getting Started

## Where should I start?

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### 1. Determine your goals!

Are you interested in passing the Chicago Statement? Or hosting a free speech town hall? You can have multiple goals, but we recommend prioritizing one goal before tackling another.

### 2. Understand *why* this work is important to you.

Why is this important, not only to you or a specific group of students, but also to your campus? Working with student government requires a goal that will impact and serve the entire student body.

### 3. Learn about your student government's process.

When and where does your student government meet? Who in student government would be the best person to help you? Understanding how your student government is run is integral to accomplishing your goal effectively.

Most student governments have three branches, modeled on the United States government. This sample structure is meant to give you an idea of where to initially seek help. For example, if you seek funding for a First Amendment celebration, contacting the Chief Financial Officer or Grants Committee in the executive branch would be a great place to start. However, if you are looking to pass the Chicago Statement, contacting your representative in the legislative branch (or running for a position yourself) would be the ideal path.

## Sample Student Government Structure

### Executive Branch

Includes President, Vice President, and their cabinet

Controls finances and groups media presence, serves as delegate to administrative meetings, plans events on behalf of the student government

### Legislative Branch

Includes elected representatives across colleges, residence halls, or student groups

Writes and votes on legislation to better the student experience

### Judicial Branch

Includes Chief Justice and Associate Justices

Interprets bylaws and Constitution

## Working with your Executive Branch

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Working with your executive branch is a great choice if your goal does not require a policy change, but instead is centered around event-hosting, social media, or political lobbying.

Work with your administrative bodies and SGA executive branch to advocate for free-speech-friendly orientation modules: you can check out FIRE's example here. Or, propose hosting an orientation event to educate new students on their rights!

Executive branches often include committees that have a specific focus or goal. Ask if there is interest in creating a free expression committee. This committee could be responsible for free speech events or advocacy.

Some executive branches have a legislative affairs committee responsible for lobbying at a state or federal level. Speak to them about any free speech bills that may be coming to your capital floor, and ask how you can help advocate for free expression and for students' best interests.

## Free Speech Event Ideas

Host a First Amendment Celebration to spread awareness of — and provide historical background on — the importance of civil liberties.

Host a Speak Truth to Power Open Mic Night where students can share which different issues they want to champion.

Bring a FIRE staffer to your campus to discuss free speech or due process issues.

Hold a First Amendment panel or town hall with administrators, professors, and faculty to discuss free speech policies at your campus.

Share a presentation on censorship with a student group.

Host a celebration for Constitution Week, celebrated annually during the week of September 17-23.



## Working with the Legislative Branch

A legislative branch of a student government often has a narrow focus on advocating for students' best interests through writing and voting on legislation. This branch often consists of electors who hold representation based on college affiliation, class year, neighborhood, or dorm. If you choose to work with the legislative branch, it's a best practice to work with the elected representative who represents you.

Every school has a different process of writing and passing legislation. FIRE recommends reaching out to the representative(s) who represent you and speaking to them about your interest. (This legislation could include affirming the Chicago Statement at your school, or writing a new free speech policy.)



## What is the Chicago Statement?

If you've gotten this far, you're probably wondering what the Chicago Statement is and if it's right for your school. Published by the University of Chicago in 2014, the Chicago Statement is a document which affirms free expression and academic freedom. Since its creation, over 80 institutions (public and private) have adopted it, in some form, as a free expression policy. FIRE considers the Chicago Statement an excellent First Amendment policy for schools.

## Techniques to Help Pass Legislation

Show up! This is the most important thing you can do: **say yes to every meeting, coffee, and planned event.** You never know who will be there and who may be interested in what you have to say!

### Seek out diverse co-sponsors.

Ask members of different student groups, professors from different departments, and administrative supporters. Showcase a wide range of support across the university.

### Consider coordinating an email campaign

geared toward student government representatives. Reps rarely hear from students outside of their own circle.

### Check your student government's website,

where voting records should be uploaded. Find reps who have voted favorably on resolutions similar to those you would like to pass, and ask if they will co-sponsor — or consider voting "yes" on — your legislation.

### Educate potential voters on the First Amendment

by presenting a slideshow detailing what it is and why it's important to your school.

**Create a whip count** to help ensure a positive result. This can help you determine who you should talk to about your legislation. See an example on page 05.

## Working with the Legislative Branch

A whip count is a helpful method for tracking the likelihood that your student government will pass your legislation. Below is an example of what a whip count can look like. Representatives are labeled by the position that you think they would take on a potential piece of legislation.

One technique is to reach out to voters who “lean yes” first. These are voters who are likely interested in your position, but uneducated. Educating voters about your legislation can ensure that a “lean yes” becomes a “strong yes” — thus, a vote for free speech!

Avoid reaching out to voters labeled as “strong no:” these voters already have their minds made up, and you likely don’t have the time or resources to convince them otherwise. Encourage “strong yes” voters to sign on to your legislation, and work to convince “lean yes” and “lean no” voters to vote in your favor.



Representative	Vote
At Large Rep 1	Strong No
At Large Rep 2	Lean No
At Large Rep 3	Unknown
At Large Rep 4	Strong Yes
Dorm Rep 1	Unknown
Dorm Rep 2	Strong Yes
Dorm Rep 3	Strong Yes
Dorm Rep 4	Lean Yes
Liberal Arts Rep 1	Lean No
Liberal Arts Rep 2	Strong Yes
Liberal Arts Rep 3	Strong No
Liberal Arts Rep 4	Lean yes

## Voting Day

**Be present!** As a student author, it’s important to be present when your legislation is brought to the floor. This demonstrates your commitment to these efforts. If possible bring other students to visually demonstrate support for your bill.

**Speak out!** Be prepared to speak on your bill and why it is important and necessary for the future of your campus as a whole. Student governments work on legislation for the best interest of all students: First Amendment rights fall within that realm. Share how other schools have passed similar legislation and how this resolution will change students’ lives for the better.

**Keep going!** No matter what the result is, keep going. If your legislation doesn’t pass, gather feedback and work on redrafting it. If it does pass, keep in contact with the administrators responsible for implementing your resolution’s requirements, to ensure timely implementation.

**Tell us about it!** FIRE encourages all student activists to share their work with us through our activism page.

Vote Type	Estimated Number Of Votes
Strong No	2
Lean No	2
Unknown	2
Lean Yes	6
Strong Yes	4





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