

The Constitution of the University of Wisconsin System Student Governance Association

The goal of this document is to explain how we as student leaders came together, how we wrote the constitution, what is in it, and why we believe that this group – the University of Wisconsin System Student Governance Association – is necessary. This process has been months, if not years in the making, and it will be critical to be unified in the years ahead.

Students are the core of the University of Wisconsin System (UW), and their voices are critical to the operations of our system. Student voices advocate for and further the mission of the UW. As a result, student shared governance is critical for the University of Wisconsin System and the state of Wisconsin as a whole.

In recent years, student voices have suffered, especially statewide. Organizing students statewide is incredibly difficult and often takes weeks or months to do anything of substance. Students and System have attempted to address this in the form of UW Student Representatives and the UW Student Presidential Council, but for various reasons, these attempts have been less successful than hoped for.

The process began in April of last year, when the Student Body President of Stevens Point, Will Scheder, began researching the history of the UW System, attempting to fully understand the past twenty years of political, financial, and governance history at the System.

United Council had been something that many students had vaguely heard of, but Will had never looked deeper into it. As his research went on, Will discovered the sheer influence and effectiveness of United Council (UC) in the state of Wisconsin. United Council was the last truly effective statewide student governance body. UC was a nonprofit that formed in 1960 at UW-Stevens Point. It was comprised of representatives from each campus; an elected President, Vice President, and secretary; and hired directors. It was supported by bi-annual student referendums on each campus. Every student body that voted to join UC paid a \$3 segregated fee that could be refunded upon request, called the “Mandatory Refundable Fee.”

United Council was responsible for the drafting of the language contained in Wisconsin Statute 36.09(5), they were instrumental in saving student segregated fees after the Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System v. Southworth decision, they were critical in creating two student seats on the Board of Regents, and they were instrumental in the passage of the 2013 tuition freeze. Without United Council and student advocacy, the UW System would not be what it is today.

UC was not without its flaws or opponents. From conversations with UWSP Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs Al Thompson, former state representative and co-chair of the Joint Finance Committee (JFC) John Nygren, and former United Council President Seth Hoffmeister, as well as some news articles, not every student and especially not every student government supported UC near its end.

Over time, United Council became more and more professional. The director positions were filled by UW graduates- not current students. This rubbed many people the wrong way, but the largest factor in United Council’s loss of support was its shift from a culture of partnership and

coalition building to aggressive advocacy and combativeness. United Council essentially burned its bridges and lost a lot of trust- even with individual student governments.

In 2011, there was a contentious referendum at UW-Eau Claire. The UW-Eau Claire Student Senate (UWEC SS) opposed United Council and the way it was representing students statewide. UC and UWEC SS ran opposing campaigns, and with over 2000 students voting, UC won that referendum in a 65 to 35 vote.

In 2012, several members of United Council went to Washington, D.C. to hold a sit-in at the Sallie Mae office with students from across the country. They blocked traffic and the doorway, eventually causing several students, including UC students, to be arrested. No one was charged, but this event worsened United Council's relations with several student governments in Wisconsin even further.

As a result of these events, UWEC SS wrote a letter, known as the "White Paper," to members of the JFC asking them to defund United Council. In the 2013-2015 biennial budget, the JFC made the Mandatory Refundable Fee illegal, cutting off UC's funding source. After this, UC's membership withered until they stopped operating completely in 2016.

Prior to 2016, the United Council began to form the UW System Student Representatives as a place that student governments across the system could gather. After United Council stopped operating, the individual student governments continued where United Council had left off. UW System Student Representatives operated until May of 2019, when no formal election of new leadership was held. UW System Student Representatives has not been in operation since 2019. The last Chair of UW System Student Representatives, Dyllan Griepentrog, was a student at UWSP. He expressed that as a student with many other responsibilities, the commitment was simply too much to volunteer.

In its place, the UW System Administration and former Regent Olivia Woodmansee created the UW System Presidential Council (UWSSPC) in the fall of 2020. UWSSPC is simply a gathering of student government leaders, similar to the faculty or staff councils. The organization has potential, but it was bogged down in infighting and complaints about individual campuses. UWSSPC had at most eight student governments participating at a time, even with the meetings occurring online.

The reasons for the failures of a defunded UC, UW System Student Representatives, and UWSSPC are twofold.

The first problem is legitimacy, perception, and effectiveness. UW System has certainly tried to help students form a statewide body, but any group formed and managed by UW System will be seen as less legitimate by students. This was something that several student governments expressed last year during UWSSPC. Student-lead initiatives are, in general, more trusted and more effective. It is also important that any statewide group be efficient and effective, and not get bogged down in quorum issues or disputes on individual campuses. The focus must be statewide.

The second problem contributes to the first. Students, and especially student leaders, have their attention pulled in several different directions. Students must pay for rent, food, attend meetings, lead a shared governance organization, prepare for a career, get a degree, the list goes on. All student government positions take a significant amount of time to do well. Volunteering is valuable, but there is no way that many student leaders would have the time to do what they do if they weren't compensated. For several years, there has been little to no funding for state-wide student organizing bodies. The unfunded statewide bodies demand yet more time that many students just are not able to commit, and those bodies have not been effective as a result. Any effective statewide student governance body needs funding to pay people for their time, travel, and commitment, and this is supported by the many achievements of United Council.

Will began reaching out to all thirteen 4-year comprehensive campuses in the fall of 2021, hoping to come together and discuss this problem. He traveled to eleven of the thirteen campuses, aside from Superior and Parkside, which was due more to scheduling issues than anything else. There, he brought this problem to the attention of each campus and asked for support in forming a new statewide body, one that could correct the failures of the past and work to reforge ties among the individual student governments across the state.

In that spirit, leaders of student governments from across the state began meeting on a regular basis to draft a constitution for what would become the UW System Student Governance Association, beginning in January 2022 at UW-Eau Claire. From there, meetings were held every two to three weeks to amend the constitution and solicit feedback from the diverse campuses that this body would one day represent.

On the Constitution

The Constitution is a document of dreams and compromises. Those who wrote the constitution recognized that there is an immense amount of work to do, and a long, uncertain road ahead. The Constitution is meant to be seen as a starting point, a place to begin with the UW System Student Governance Association. As such, the authors kept it flexible and lightweight, hoping to give the UWS SGA the ability to change with time.

A few notes on the Constitution. The body created by it is known as the University of Wisconsin System Student Governance Association for a reason – it is meant to be seen as a collection of student governments, designed to serve and amplify their interests. It is a body of equal representation, with each campus receiving two seats. The goal has never been and will never be to interfere with individual campus operations. UWS SGA will always focus on statewide initiatives, such as the tuition freeze and state budget.

The authors kept the executive branch very lightweight, so as to make it flexible and easy to establish. They recognized that the first few years of this group would be critical, and as such the executive needs to be minimalist and highly adaptable. It is the hope that one day the executive branch will become more extensive, but that will likely be many years from now.

The constitution also contains provisions for committees, some of which are laid out and some of which are not. As is the theme, the authors wanted to keep everything flexible. Any officer of any member student government can sit on a committee of the UWS SGA. This was done to increase interest, investment, and membership of the body. The Chairs of the committees will receive speaking rights on the larger Senate body, but do not necessarily need to be a senator of the UWS SGA.

On the topic of two-year schools, the authors struggled on a way to include them. Two-years are a very important part of the UW System, but they were not involved in these conversations. They were asked to, but there was not much success there. It was also difficult to include them as the two-year student governments vary so wildly, with some being independent, others working under their four-year, and others being nonexistent. In the current language, each two-year can get one seat. This was a compromise solution until a better way to include them can be discussed in the coming years.

There are many questions left unanswered in the constitution. How does legislation work? How do committees work? What is the process for joining and leaving? These are all very important questions, and they were not forgotten about. The more specific aspects of the UWS SGA will be determined in the bylaws. Again, the authors wanted everything to be very flexible. The bylaws will be crafted by Will Scheder and others over the summer and will be adopted in the fall by the seated senate of the UWS SGA.

Looking to the Future

It is the hope of the authors that this Constitution – a document of hope, compromises, and goodwill – will be adopted by the various student governments of this state. Article XIII states that nine of the thirteen four-year student governments must ratify this document before it takes effect, meaning over 2/3rds of the state must approve of this.

We hope that the benefits of this group will prove their worth. We have seen many situations in the last decade where the absence of a powerful statewide group has hurt us all. Act 10, the 2018 reorganization with the two-years, the end of the tuition freeze, the last System President search, the newest student regent – our voices were not heard in these processes, for good or for ill. Students were neglected in a way that other shared governance groups were not.

The UWS SGA will be critical in the time going forward. It is a political era in our state where the legislature has attempted to pass laws limiting campus speech, what we can learn, or who we can work with. Reorganizing the campuses and budget cuts have also been discussed. With an election this fall and a new budget in the spring of 2023, our unified voice is going to be critical – and essential – to the future of this system and this state.

Further, the student governments of this state know very little about each other. Each student government is diverse, with a unique history, powers, and practices. If an effective statewide

group existed, student governments could share information with and meet each other. Any leader who participated in the work we did together this year can attest just how valuable this is.

Eau Claire and Whitewater, the two campuses most in support of the dissolution of United Council, now support this. Campuses from Superior to Milwaukee, Madison to Stevens Point, have helped author this constitution. It is time for us as students to come together and ensure our voices are heard. The future of the UW System and Wisconsin is reliant on us – it is time that we make this known.

Signed,

Student leaders of the UW System