

# A Solid Foundation

## Building blocks for SGA growth

By Anna Campitelli, editor

Five years ago, **Columbia College Chicago's** brand-new Student Government Association spent their first official meeting brainstorming ways to fill nine empty senate seats. Just two months later, their inaugural president resigned. That spring, SGA Advisor and Director of Student Leadership Dominic Cottone wrote a letter to CCC's student newspaper, *The Columbia Chronicle*, urging students to get involved with SGA in time for elections.

While still facing challenges, the organization has come a long way since then. SGA now sits on several campus-wide committees and has a representative on CCC's board of trustees. Members work together with administrators on multiple student issues. This spring, 2006-07 President Brian Matos even became the first SGA president to win re-election.

By making strides in the following areas, CCC's SGA has emerged as a credible and effective voice for students.

### Showing Legitimacy

Since their first year, SGA members have held open forums to find out what students want. "Forums allow SGA to communicate with the student body on a more personal level, learn more about individual department concerns, and show the student body that the SGA cares, is available, and is working to improve student life," says Vanessa Torres, assistant to the director of student leadership and 2005-06 SGA president.

Last year, SGA conducted a student census through OASIS, CCC's Internet portal. "The results revealed information such as how often computer labs are used, a desire for better financial services from the school, the need for better communication tools, and the students' overall satisfaction with their academic experience," Matos says.

With concrete data and feedback on hand, the administration becomes more willing to listen and act on SGA's requests. Having this kind of credibility helped SGA gain representation on campus task forces and made creating a student trustee position possible.



Go to [www.studentleader.com](http://www.studentleader.com) to learn more about CCC's SGA accomplishments.

### Replenishing the Ranks

At CCC—an arts school where students have little free time for extracurriculars—SGA has to reach out to students to combat their apathy and get them involved. "Prior to this year's first senate meeting, SGA members took time on a Saturday to make and post flyers that invited students to celebrate with us: to talk, eat, and learn what SGA was all about," says Akisha Lockhart, 2006-07 vice president of communications.



**The Windy City Senate:** (counterclockwise from bottom) Columbia College Chicago SGA officers Andrew Breen, Akisha Lockhart, Vanessa Torres, Annie Kelly, Jeffrey Garceau, Courtney Wylie, and Brian Matos.

Piquing student interest is one thing; getting a student to make a commitment is another. During Torres' presidential term, SGA created the Voices in Power committee with that idea in mind. Considered their "junior varsity senate," VIP meets prior to senate meetings to discuss the agenda for that day. Then, the VIP senate representative shares the committee's feedback during the actual senate meeting.

"Not only does this give power back to the students-at-large and force our senators to hear their constituents, but it creates a built-in pool of senate 'back-ups' and future members," Torres says.

### Finding Common Ground

Although it's important to make the student voice heard, SGA needs to know when to negotiate. "Some of SGA's biggest challenges have been balancing the needs of the students versus the needs of the

administration," Cottone says. "But, they've worked through this by learning to compromise."

When the vice president of student affairs proposed a \$15 increase to the student activity fee this year, SGA saw that it was necessary to help fund campus organizations but wanted students to know an increase wouldn't become a regular occurrence. SGA approved the one-time increase on the condition that the administration wouldn't raise it again for at least three academic years.

"This deal gave the VP of student affairs the money his office needed, ensured that student groups would be adequately funded, and guaranteed that the same group of students wouldn't be hit up for money twice," Matos says.

### Pursuing a Vision

SGA is currently working on several multi-year goals, including helping to fund-raise \$90 million for construction of a campus student center.

Long-term projects can be trying when results aren't anywhere in sight. Having a supportive advisor like Cottone has helped keep SGA members focused and on track. "He's our number-one fan and has been instrumental in the success that we've had," says Na'm Hayes, 2006-07 vice president of finance. "When our spirits are low and we don't see the vision, he'll sometimes sell us on our own product."

### Building on the Past

"We try to learn from the previous experiences and trials of those who have come before us," says Andrew Breen, 2006-07 executive vice president. But when SGA does make a mistake, they do their best to turn the situation into a learning experience.

"This year, we had members talking to media outlets without being on the same page with the SGA, costing us some negative press in the *Chronicle*," Cottone says. "However, it led to SGA developing more policy and procedure regarding external communications and making proposals, which will prevent that from happening in the future."

In addition, SGA is in the unique situation of having Torres—a member of SGA's first senate and current CCC staff member—as a resource. While she hasn't advised SGA in an official capacity, Torres has helped by answering questions about the organization's past.

"I sort of served as a living history book," she says. "In the beginning, officers came to me frequently, but as the year progressed, they didn't need me as much." SL

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