

The Constitution: Your Cornerstone

When was the last time you read the constitution of your organization? If you're like many activity advisers, chances are good that your constitution doesn't accurately reflect your group's current structure and activities—a risky practice for an adviser if you are ever challenged by a disgruntled student or parent. Constitutions are often created and then forgotten about as a group develops and expands. It's a good idea to check your constitution every few years at least to make sure it matches current practice. In addition, the process of revising—or creating—a constitution can help a student activity organization focus on its purpose and put new energy into areas on which it wants to concentrate.

Elements of a Constitution

To many people the word constitution implies formality and intimidating rules and regulations. A constitution is simply a written set of rules for a group. The constitution defines the limits of authority of the organization and gives a sense of both order and pur-

pose for conducting business. An organization's constitution should be stated in simple, easily understood language and should include only essential items.

Most constitutions follow a generally accepted structure, with major parts called articles. The articles follow a logical sequence and each describes an enduring aspect of the organization. The following articles are typical for school organizations:

Article I: Name

Statement of the name of the organization.

Article II: Purpose

The general purpose or mission of the group.

Article III: Powers

Powers vested in the organization; the right of veto by the principal.

Article IV: Membership

Definition of membership for

the group; qualifications of membership. Who is eligible for membership? Are there any restrictions? How does one become a member? How are members identified?

Article V: Officers

Description of the officer positions; qualifications for office; duties and responsibilities of office; executive committee description, if applicable; terms of office; procedure for removal of officers; procedure for filling vacated offices.

Article VI: Elections

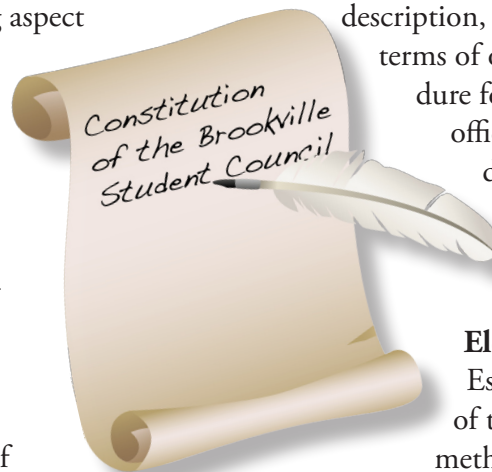
Establishment of the time, methods, and procedures for nomination, campaigns, and election of members, officers, and advisers.

Article VII: Meetings

Frequency of meetings and provisions for special sessions; number of members necessary for a quorum.

Article VIII: Committees

Description of standing committees and provisions for the



formation of special committees as the need arises.

Article IX: Finances

Description of source of group funds; membership dues, if applicable; budget approval process; limitation on how funds may be spent; procedure for requesting funds.

Article X: Ratification

Method and procedure for approval of the constitution.

Article XI: Amendments

Provisions for amending the constitution.

Bylaws are rules adopted by a group for its own meetings or affairs. Bylaws usually are items that are subject to change more frequently than items in the constitution. Because of this, the process for changing bylaws should be somewhat easier than amending the constitution. Bylaws typically cover such areas as: the parliamentary authority for meetings, specifications for election speeches and campaigns, balloting procedures, timing of elections, times and locations of meetings, and so forth.

Creating a Constitution

Creating a constitution can sometimes be a difficult, time-consuming process. The following steps can take some of the hassle out of the process and ensure that your group develops a constitution that is an accurate reflection of its mission.

■ **Gather ideas and information** from group members, faculty, administration, and constitutions from other organizations. Develop a list of questions about how your organization should work—what is the purpose of the group, what officers should the group have, what should their duties be, etc.—and divide your group members into groups of three or four. Each group should discuss the questions and complete the survey together. You might also gather ideas from the constitutions of other schools by looking online or calling area schools to ask for a copy.

■ **Review the gathered information.** This can get tedious for a group of 25 members to pour over, so a smaller committee is recommended. You might want to have a constitution committee or a group of officers compile all of the information.

■ **Decide the basics of your constitution.** Decide what your constitution will consist of. Think of broad, general topics at this point rather than specific rules and regulations. For example, at this point you may decide that your constitution will outline the duties of officers, attendance policies, elections, etc.

■ **Decide the basics for each part of the constitution.** You don't necessarily have to use

complete sentences and ornate language at this point, just concentrate on putting down in writing what each topic will consist of. For example, now you would actually list the duties of each officer.

■ **Edit the constitution.**

Smooth out the rough edges and write everything out in complete sentences; use a dictionary and thesaurus to help select just the right wording.

■ **Seek feedback.** To make sure the constitution is clear and easy to understand, at this point it would be a good idea to get the feedback of the entire organization. You might also seek feedback from the adviser, principal, English or journalism teacher (for clarity of writing), or other students who are not involved in the organization for a fresh perspective.

■ **Ratify (vote to adopt) your constitution.** One suggestion for ratification is to vote on each part of the constitution separately. Then the organization will know which parts they agree on so they can be adopted as is. The group will then also know which parts are controversial and need to be discussed further. If necessary, continue to edit the constitution until ratification is completed.

■ **Distribute copies** of your constitution to all members, faculty, administration, and any other interested students.