

Clarifying Student Government Autonomy

Each of Oregon's public universities has a democratically elected student government with the ability, granted in state statute, to set and allocate mandatory student fees. Student leaders decide how best to support their campuses. These governments, typically called "the Associated Students of _____", pay for many vital services accessible to any student, such as childcare, food pantries, and public transit passes, and integral parts of campus life, such as student clubs and organizations, student union buildings, athletics, and campus newspapers.

Student governments elevate students to participate in the shared governance of their colleges and universities while providing excellent training for the next generation of leaders. This training is so valuable because of how Oregon statute empowers our student governments. Total annual mandatory incidental fee budgets are in the million to tens of millions range. Beyond driving the mandatory incidental fee process, state statute also delegates specific powers to student governments including nominating candidates for student trustee positions to the governor, appointing members to advisory boards for tuition and enrollment fees, and having representatives in collective bargaining between university faculty and administration.

ORS 352.076(2)(b)(C) The undergraduate student members of the governing board shall be nominated through an internal governance process held by the official student government

ORS 352.105(2)(b) Mandatory incidental fees collected under this section shall be allocated by the recognized student government.

Despite several references to "official" or "recognized" or even "duly organized and recognized entity of" student governments throughout statute, there is no definition of student government in state law. In recent years, we have seen this lack of formal definition leveraged to weaken the autonomy that makes Oregon's student governments the gems they are. In 2023, Oregon State University [first created a policy](#) which conditioned recognition of their student governments on particular allocations of mandatory incidental fees. This overrides the student government's primary control of the mandatory fee budget, and gives administration a tool to chill the speech of members who would advocate on behalf of students in a way contrary to institution administrations' desires. **Legislators can close this loophole by recognizing the existing, decades-old student governments in statute.**

Since February 2024, OSU administration have [initiated the seizure](#) of over half the ASOSU mandatory incidental fee budget from student control, kept ASOSU from meeting via a [seven-month-long](#) “shutdown,” and have [removed the ASOSU President](#) and the Chair of ASOSU’s Student Fee Committee, two of the main three executive positions in that government, and three ASOSU Senators from office. These actions are all unprecedented and without basis in internal ASOSU governance procedures. Administrations shouldn’t get a pass to ignore the constitutions, charters, and bylaws that student governments have built and followed, in the case of ASOSU, over the course of 125 years. They certainly shouldn’t be able to take control of projects funded by students and stewarded by student government for 99 years, like OSU’s Memorial Union. **The Legislature can fix this by forbidding university administrations from taking any action abridging internal student governance procedures.**

Additionally, student leaders are democratically elected—the only people who should be able to remove them are their constituents or fellow elected leaders. Allowing university administration pick who represents students risks letting them pick what student leaders are, and are not, allowed to say. Existing governance documents already set requirements students have agreed their representatives should meet and allow for the recall or impeachment of officials. **The Legislature should require any conditions on holding office in a student government can only be set by the student government itself.**

Proposed Legislative Fixes:

- Recognize existing student governments in state statute
- Forbid university administration from infringing on internal student governance procedures and documents
- Require conditions on holding student government office can only be set by student government itself



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