

I. Introduction/Proposal

This concept plan contains a proposal to place a \$3.50/semester opt-out fee on students' term bills. This money would be used to fund the United States Student Association (USSA), a national organization of student leaders from across the country. This fee would be opt-out according to Alternative Procedure II (negative check-off) in the University's Policy on Special Student Organization Funding, and would apply only to students in all academic units at Rutgers-New Brunswick. The purpose of this fee is to fund the national and statewide efforts of USSA and its affiliated organizations in advocating for and promoting students' interests both in Trenton and in Washington. Close cooperation with Rutgers students in achieving this mission will also help to foster strong, effective student leadership here on campus. This would help Rutgers achieve its mission as a public institution by promoting shared governance, a healthy respect for and understanding of the democratic process, and, most importantly, a sense of civic responsibility.

II. United States Student Association

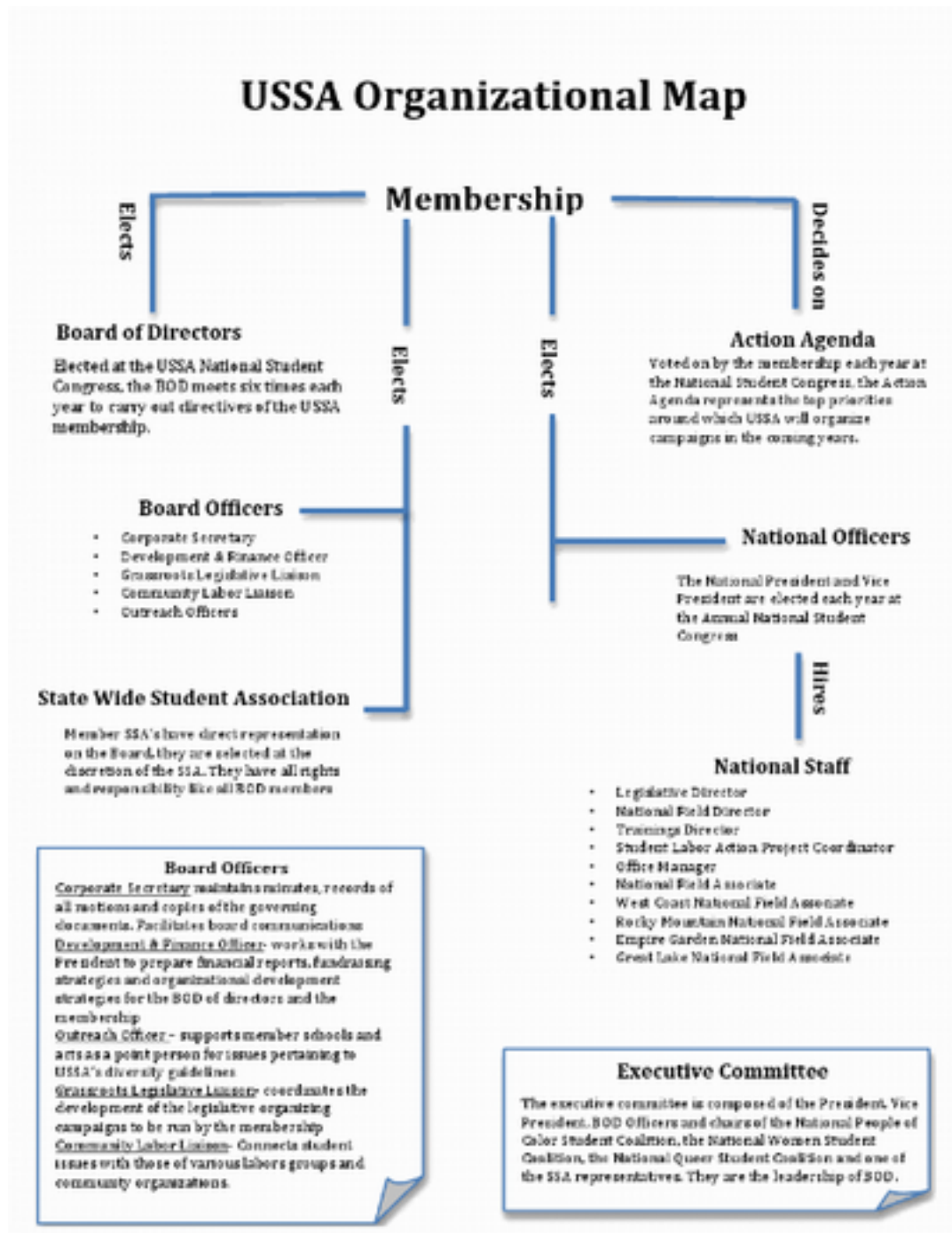
The United States Student Association (USSA) was founded in 1947, and is the oldest and largest student-led organization in the nation. The mission of the USSA is based on the core belief that education should be a right, and that students, who are affected by higher education policy, should have a voice in the policy-making arena. The USSA's vision is that one day we will live in a society where student leaders work with other officials to address matters of importance to students and understand the power they hold to bring about change. Lastly, the USSA is dedicated to building student leaders who will amplify student voice on the local, state, and federal level.

The USSA is a membership organization composed of student associations at post-secondary institutions across the United States. Rutgers University Student Assembly (RUSA) is currently a dues-paying member. As well as engaging in campaigns at the national level, USSA works closely with statewide student associations to put pressure on state officials to keep education priorities at the forefront. The USSA's major affiliate in New Jersey is New Jersey United Students (NJUS), a statewide student association that works closely with RUSA and other student governments throughout the state. If this referendum is successful, USSA will provide a fiscal sponsorship for NJUS to support statewide initiatives aimed at advocating for students' interests, while developing strong student leadership both at Rutgers University's New Brunswick campus and across the state.

The USSA's Board of Directors oversees all operations and makes all financial decisions for the organization. The Board of Directors, along with the President and Vice President, are elected annually during USSA's National Student Congress, which takes place during the summer. The Board of Directors consists of around forty seats representing different regions, statewide student associations, and historically underrepresented communities/constituencies. Board members are elected for a one-year term. The USSA President and Vice President are elected to one-year terms and serve in Washington, DC as full-time staff for the organization.

The Vice President chairs the Board of Directors.

The Board of Directors meets 6 times each year, and conducts business between those meetings via bi-weekly conference calls. The Board of Directors functions as the final authority for all matters that come before it, such as personnel and budgetary decisions. Students on the Board lend their experience and familiarity with student life to the decision-making process of the Board.



III. Educational Value

Shared governance is essential to Rutgers' ability to fulfill its core mission as a public institution. It's easy to see why. Rutgers has time and again reaffirmed its dedication to producing productive members of society: this means critically-thinking, motivated citizens committed to finding solutions to problems in their local, state, and national (indeed, in today's world, even global) communities. The need for higher education to focus on developing students' sense of civic engagement has become more apparent than ever, as the problems we face as a state, as a nation, and as a planet have become increasingly complex. Thus, even as schools clamor to increase the attractiveness of their STEM programs, the need to graduate thoughtful and informed citizens must be kept at the forefront, especially for a public institution like Rutgers. A strong tradition of student activism and shared governance is vitally important in achieving this goal.

Student government, of course, means many things. Certainly one of the many tasks of a responsible student government is advocacy. Student leaders must identify issues that negatively affect the educational experience of their constituents and seek to resolve or mitigate them. These issues may be university-wide or they may have to do with state or national policy and legislation. The latter in particular is often the case at a public research institution like Rutgers, which depends a great deal on Trenton and Washington for financial support. Advocating for students' interests in front of policymakers may seem a daunting task for a student government to accomplish alone. Fortunately, they are not alone: organizations like the USSA and its affiliates provide helpful support in the form of training and networking with student leaders throughout the state and country. Such connections can be vital in helping new student leaders learn how to advocate efficiently and serve their constituents effectively. USSA, indeed, has a long track record of successful student advocacy.

Past/Ongoing Campaigns:

Student Aid Fiscal Responsibility Act (SAFRA)

As part of the Healthcare Reconciliation Act of 2010, the United States Senate passed SAFRA. SAFRA expanded the maximum amount of an individual's Pell Grant to \$5,500. It also ended the subsidies to private loan companies, instead directing the funding towards federal Direct loans. The United States Student Association ran a campaign in support of SAFRA, rallying student leaders and putting pressure on legislators to keep affordable education a priority. The legislative victory was undoubtedly due in part to the grassroots efforts of USSA and its affiliates.

Don't Double My Rate

This past July, the interest rate on subsidized Stafford Loans was set to double from 3.4% to 6.8% unless Congress acted. The USSA pressured federal officials through legislative meetings, letters to the editor, and social media outlets to not place undue burden on the backs of students, especially considering that student loan debt had just reached \$1 trillion nationwide. On June 30, Congress settled on a one year compromise, keeping the interest rate at 3.4%. This could not have been accomplished without clear stances by student leaders to let legislators know that students were watching.

Additional \$17 Billion for Pell Grants, \$13 Million Increase for TRIO

As part of the deal to increase the debt ceiling, Pell Grants received additional \$17 billion to help close the funding gap. Divided into two installments, the Pell Grant will receive \$10 billion in 2012 and \$7 billion in 2013, which will help maintain the \$5,550 maximum award. USSA worked with its statewide affiliates to run letter-writing campaigns, visits with legislators, days of action, and press conferences to ensure the Pell Grant maximum was preserved. Additionally, in the final FY 12 agreement, Congress included a \$13.4 million increase for TRIO over the last year (\$826.5 million), for a total funding level of \$839.9 million. While Congress did not fully embrace the \$920.1 million (or 8%) increase recommended by President Obama, the FY 2012 funding level will provide funding for approximately 40 Upward Bound and McNair programs that otherwise would have been lost next year. Without a doubt, these victories are a result of hard work and leadership of students.

USSA selected by Department of Education To Represent Student Interest

Following the U.S. Department's Education announcement in October that it would hold negotiations to recommend new rules on student loans and strengthen current regulations, USSA was selected as the organization that represents the diversity of student voice. Our Legislative Director Getachew Kassa represented and prioritized the interest of students with other members of the committee to form regulations on the topic of student loans. Topics of discussion include repayment options for student borrowers, consolidating federal loans, and debt forgiveness after 20 years.

Student Empowerment Project

In December 2011, Rutgers students had the opportunity to learn the essentials of community engagement and strategic planning at the first ever "Student Empowerment Project," hosted and organized by RUSA using resources provided by the USSA. This six-hour event featured a series of lectures given by student leaders, University professors, and Rutgers alumni now working in relevant fields. Participants had the opportunity to participate in workshops dealing with public speaking, leadership development, recruitment and retention, holding press conferences, and social media visibility. Conference's stated goal was to develop educated and engaged student leaders. It was attended by over 200 students and was positively received by the student body at large. The Student Empowerment Project was an example of a conference run by students, for students in order to develop student and present a broader vision of the purpose and action of student leadership. RUSA and USSA hope to turn this event's model and content into a year-round series of skill-shares and trainings available to Rutgers students.

Summer in the City

The Summer in the City Program was run successfully from June through August, 2012. Summer in the City brought together 14 students from six NJ college campuses for a summer of living and working together in New Brunswick. The purpose of the program was to accomplish work on student issues during the Summer months through research and educational activities. The interns, chosen through an NJUS Selection Committee, researched issues affecting students at the state and campus level. In preparation for a statewide voter registration drive,

the interns familiarized themselves with election law, contacting County Clerks and University Administrators across the state. These students also learned about higher education issues, reading and discussing the trends on higher education funding at a state and national level. The interns also spent days in Trenton observing the legislative process, from Committee hearings on the Rutgers/Rowan merger to Christie addressing a joint session of the Assembly and Senate on the Legislature's proposed tax plan. This internship successfully built bonds between rising student leaders across the state, and sent them back to their campuses with a better understanding of the issues affecting students on their campuses, and the processes and institutions that guide their lives as students and citizens

Reclaiming Democracy 2012 -- Get Out The Vote!

One of USSA's core values is facilitating student involvement in the democratic process. In this spirit, USSA coordinates a national voter registration drive every two years, coinciding with federal elections. This past year, USSA worked with students across the country to register over 135,000 students nationwide. In New Jersey, USSA worked with 8 campuses to register 6,300 students to vote; 1,950 of those registrations came from the Rutgers-New Brunswick area alone. But USSA did not stop merely at registering students. They also educated students about relevant ballot questions, including, in New Jersey, State Question #1, which authorized \$750 million for higher education capital construction, as well as New Brunswick Municipal Question #1, which transitioned New Brunswick from an appointed School Board to an elected one. But USSA's work didn't end on election day. During the week following the election, USSA worked with RUSA members to oppose the destruction of provisional ballots belonging to hundreds of students who voted in New Brunswick, Piscataway, and North Brunswick. The Middlesex County Board of Elections ended up reviewing the provisional ballots in question, and finding that a few dozen of those ballots were actually valid and not to be thrown out. This was pivotal to the success of Municipal Question #1.

National Grassroots Legislative Conference

The USSA holds its National Grassroots Legislative Conference ("LegCon" for short) in March of each year as a way of educating and involving students in the legislative process. LegCon offers student leaders from across the country a chance to come together in Washington, DC for a weekend of workshops on education issues and other topics. Students were given an extensive legislative briefing highlighting the current legislation and policy changes regarding education programs, including funding for Pell Grants and TRIO programs. Workshops at LegCon 2012 included "Voter ID Laws and Students' Right to Vote", "Affirmative Action 101", and "Building Coalitions". The highlight of the conference is a federal lobby visit in which students can meet with Senators and Congressmen from their state to speak to them about higher education issues such as student debt and funding. Student leaders are presented with an opportunity to use the trainings they received throughout the week on these Congressional visits.

National Student Congress

The USSA's National Student Congress has a 65 year history of building student leaders and of coordinating the efforts of student governments and organizations across the country. National

Student Congress is a 5 day event held annually in late July during which members of the USSA come together to take part in trainings, craft campaigns, and network with their peers throughout the country. Congress is also where the USSA elects its leadership for the next year, including a democratically chosen Board of Directors and a Vice President and President, all chosen from the USSA's various member campuses and organizations. Additionally, Congress offers participants a network of similarly motivated student leaders with whom they can compare best practices and share goals and tactics.

IV. Justification for Special Funding

RUSA currently pays dues to the USSA by voting annually to do so, at an amount of \$0.50/student. The proposal in this concept plan would replace the current funding structure here at Rutgers. USSA has no intention of double-dipping into students' pockets: if the concept plan is approved and the referendum passes, USSA will be funded solely by the student fee on the term bill and not by any expenditures from RUSA. This carries two benefits.

On the one hand, such increased funding, which is above and beyond what RUSA could reasonably provide out of its treasury given its own budget constraints, would allow the USSA to strengthen student advocacy in the state of New Jersey. Indeed, the USSA intends to use some of this money to enter into a fiscal sponsorship relationship with NJUS to increase its statewide presence without sacrificing its strength on the national stage. Currently, limitations exist on the ability to institute student-run programs using an all-volunteer model at the state level. Institutional memory, while strong at this point in time, will fade without a structure to preserve it. Simply put, student leaders are, after all, still students, and, while certainly devoted to bettering the lives of all New Jersey students, it is often difficult to balance these two roles. USSA hires professional staff to manage its national programs, and this has proven effective. The increased fee would allow this process to be replicated at the statewide level.

In addition to this practical reality, the argument for an opt-out fee to replace RUSA-paid annual membership dues must also be made on normative grounds. Currently, Rutgers is a dues-paying member of USSA by virtue of RUSA's \$0.50/student annual expenditure. However, RUSA itself is funded by students via mandatory student fees, so under the status quo, the dues paid by RUSA are coming out of students' pockets anyway. However, aside from RUSA elections, students have no direct way to influence whether or not RUSA uses their money for this purpose. While it is of course our belief that the investment students make in the USSA pays dividends, we nonetheless note that in a school as large and diverse as Rutgers, there are bound to be those who may disagree. The opt-out fee process was designed to respect those differences, and the USSA wholeheartedly agrees with that democratizing principle.