

PROJECT CATEGORIES OVERVIEW

**Campus Communication**

# Introduction

The IMSA community prides itself on diversity and this ideal is matched not only in culture and background, but in the many different segments that make up our Academy, both on campus and away from it. Students, alumni, parents, staff, faculty, and other outside observers all have vested interests in the trajectory of IMSA. These segments come coupled with their own leadership organizations, like the Parents Association Council (PAC), the Faculty Senate, and Student Council. These organizations act as liaisons to their respective groups and as ombudsmen of the IMSA administration. In IMSA, along with other schools that are members of the National Consortium for Specialized Secondary Schools of Math, Science, and Technology (NCSSSMST, who are also geared toward pioneering education outreach and the advancement of the human condition, students, though arguably the most essential part of these communities, are often underrepresented and unheard. There is the potential for students at all of these schools to significantly enhance their quality of life as well as positively influence strides in public education, but all are hampered by the obstacle of communication. IMSA is a much-watched testing ground for this because, as a residential school, our members are theoretically better connecting. In practice, however, this does not always prove true. IMSA struggles to communicate internally, with small holes in the distribution of logistical information and gaping chasms in the exchange of opinions, ideas, and projects. Student Council has launched a number of endeavors directed at closing the communication gap on campus and better informing and organizing students. Chief among these are the Student Council Website, Communications Committee, and the Student Council Facebook page. However, due to low participation from the student body the Committee has been discontinued and the cabinet must take communication into its own hands. The debut of the Themed Open Forums and Roundtables by the 2014 Student Council cabinet was a landmark advancement in this category that, like their Roman counterparts, created an outlet for communication on significant issues. There is plenty of work yet to be done. The IMSA student body may never be able to create substantial change at IMSA without a centralized and organized Student Council that can both distribute information effectively and hold the attention of all students in its projects. Though achieving such a state will be a difficult challenge, as the Romans might have advised: “*per aspera de astra*” - “a rough path leads to the stars.”

# Notable Projects

## Email Digest (2013)

IMSA uses a list serve system to send emails to users in different groups. There are lists by affiliation, graduating class, and even for individual clubs or organizations that request them. In an example of attempting to enhance campus communication with this tool, the 2009 Student Council asked the athletics department to start sending email updates of students’ performance in competitions and other events. While there are some students who appreciate features like this, for the dissemination of information, only a fraction of the student body actually checks and thoroughly reads emails sent by list serves. Social media, print posters, and word of mouth are generally regarded as more effective forms of communication. When information is not expected by students (e.g., schedules for final exams) or otherwise deemed important (e.g., email from principal about why IMSA does not have snow days), email falls short of reaching large segments of the student body. Email digests were considered in an attempt to decongest inboxes and streamline emails for students reading them. In 2013, certain Student Council members experimented with a digest form of the list serves that sends a list of all emails sent on a particular day with subject lines listed as a table of contents and the messages embedded below. However, because this format scrubs attachments from the emails, it was not recommended for more common use.

## Wall of the Week (2013)

In the fall of 2013, Student Council experimented with a new method of advertising to the student body. Because the Old Caf is a popular place to post student posters, two laminated “walls” were posted there with sections for events on individual days in the week as well as general updates. While the Communications Committee chairs were able to regularly update this display with information as well as the weekly StudSnaps, few students found it an effective form of advertising and it was removed after a few months. However, the Wall of the Week was an improvement on previous Student Council endeavors in panel advertising, which included tack boards, white boards, display screens, and other measures that fell into disuse due to the Council’s failure to update them regularly.

## Student Council Website

When IMSA’s marketing department mandated that all student and faculty groups move their online presence to WordPress in 2013, Student Council received a new interface. The website at sites.imsa.edu/studco had previously been maintained by Councils with webmasters and freelance web development students. It generated many useful features like the Trip Request Form and subscriptions to Club news, but maintenance from year to year was unreliable. The 2013 Cabinet planned for the new WordPress site to be renovated in three phases: familiarizing the president with the interface, posting information online, and finally, making the website a comprehensive database for information about Student Council projects. Data analysis suggests that the website drew an average of 10 regular users per week until early spring of 2014, when the debut of the ClashCentral web widget generated a spike in visitors. Regular usership has since been pushed up to about 160 students, with peak outreach reaching upwards of 60% of the student body. However, strong usage of the website by the student body remains for basic services such as viewing Sodexo menus and the activities calendar. More dynamic user interaction, such as reading cabinet reports and sending feedback to Student Council is not as strong. For example, the 2014 Student Council cabinet released its landmark Pillars of Innovation Report online only, and on its debut day, the corresponding page only reached 53 students. The Student Council website is important not just for relaying cabinet news, but as a platform for increasing transparency, simplifying information, and closing the communications gap in the IMSA community.

The 2018-19 Cabinet unanimously decided to avoid devoting large amounts of time to maintaining the website. The Cabinet believed that it was a nice gesture towards transparency, but required students to go out of their own way to learn about StudCo, which proved ineffective as evidenced by the websites years of inactivity. The website is now mainly used for election information and formal documents, as opposed to project updates which are disseminated through the Facebook page.

## Communications Committee (2014)

The now-defunct Communications Committee led projects like the SAT Words of the Week, Oughta Know, and Bathroom Minutes. All of those endeavors were designed to improve campus communication in terms of the availability of information and the connection between community members. The second piece to the committee’s purpose, concerning connections within the IMSA community was arguably more successful than the first. Events like the Last Lectures, references to Randy Pausch’s final speech at Carnegie Mellon University, and Minds on the Mic, a variant of TED talks for IMSA, were generally appreciated by students and adults alike. While these measures may still be used by future Student Councils to integrate the various groups at our campus, the informational products of the Communications Committee often felt forced. Weekly committee meetings struggled to generate critical discussions and historical Committee Chairs reflect that they had to resort to incentivizing non-cabinet members students to actually complete projects. Furthermore, starting in 2012, a decrease in cabinet member attendance at these meetings became apparent as well. The inability of the committee to engage its members and the student body over many years led to its removal from the Student Council constitution in the spring of 2014.

## General Assembly (2015)

The Communications Committee was not the only Student Council committee to be removed. The 2013 Student Council cabinet oversaw fours committees. Three of these were open committees for anyone in the student body to participate in: Communications, Academics, and Residential Life. Committee number four, the infamous Reform Committee, was private and consisted of two members who were nominated to the cabinet-level position by the Student Council president after they lost their respective executive elections. All of these committees were regarded as ineffective by the student body and thought of as disconnected by cabinet members. The Residential Life and Reform committees were removed from the Student Council constitutions over the summer of 2013 and the Communications and Academics committees were removed the year afterward. For the 2015 Student Council cabinet, the committees were replaced by one open committee called the General Assembly. It met at 9:00 PM on Monday nights, keeping a space in the weekly schedule that many administrators and some students identified as “Student Council’s time slot.” Plans for the Assembly, as drawn up by the graduating seniors of the 2014 Student Council cabinet, included sharing more details from cabinet meetings with the student body and providing a hands-on “work time” for actual progress to be on projects. The purposed of the Assembly was to serve as a useful outlet for quick feedback and for members to lead projects that are not necessarily of cabinet-level intensity and more temporary in nature. Attendance, however, dropped over time, and Student Council resorted to Hall and Class GA’s.

## StudStream (2014, 2016)

The StudStream project was a product of the 2014 Communications Committee that developed regular segments around five minutes in length to be released to the student body on Fridays at midday and online on the Student Council website. The content resembled television news reports, with segments ranging from updates from the Council and pop culture to special “field” segments and the elusive Student Council Weather Committee. Critical reception from the student body generally regarded the project as miscellaneous in nature and gave mild ratings on its production quality. However, StudStream played a role in a larger, institution-wide struggle. When Student Council began pursuing this endeavor, it faced an empowered marketing department, given greater jurisdiction over communication in the IMSA community by an Academy attempting to solidify its public branding. Current students, alumni, faculty, staff, and even members of the department itself felt that policies and practices instituted by the marketing department limited the production of media at IMSA and were overly protective toward content generated by members of the Academy. Through a variety of tactics ranging from alumni testimonials to a disparaging satirical article published in the ACRONYM, the 2014 Student Council played a heavy hand in weakening the marketing department’s influence at IMSA. By late fall, the Communications Committee was given permission to create a YouTube channel for the StudStream videos and allowed to begin production.

The StudStream project was discontinued after the 2015-16 cabinet due to its high level of maintenance. Hours and hours were invested into producing videos which received as much or less reception than other communication methods.

## IMSA Virtual Campus (2014)

To streamline the flow of information to students on social media, the 2014 Student Council cabinet created a Facebook group specifically for campus announcements and advertisements. Fun Fact: The group’s name was chosen because John Satter (Alumni, Class of 2014) lost a bet with Vinesh Kannan. Many students feel that the group is an improvement on email advertisements and club presidents feel comfortable using it as a primary communication outlet, sometimes eclipsing email. Student Council had a momentary struggle in the spring of 2014 over whether or not faculty and parents should be allowed into the group.

## IRC Archive Documents

Marti Guarin, a charter staff member who worked in the Information Resource Center (IRC), came out of retirement to help IMSA create an archive of work and records from all community members. The archives are housed in the IRC and include landmark documents such as IMSA’s founding legislation, private reflections from staff members like Dr. Stephanie Pace Marshall and Dr. Eric McLaren, and historical renovations to the residence halls. Every year, Student Council also submits a folder as a record of the challenges its cabinet faced and the victories it achieved. Despite being the first student group to actively use the Archives as a resource, since the 2014 Cabinet, Student Council has not submitted an entry.

## Open Forums (2014)

As one of its Pillars of Innovation, the 2014 Student Council cabinet created a new communication measure called the Themed Open Forums and Roundtables project. The format included both student and adult presenters. The former served to showcase ongoing Student Council projects so that students could get better background knowledge as well as inspiration through example projects related to the theme. The latter was present to answer questions and provide feedback on new ideas. Four Forums were held: the Course Forum, the Mental Health Forum, the Residential Life Forum, and the Sodexo Forum. Note that these forum themes correspond with the Six Dimensions of Student Council Projects, with the exception of Communication and Club Life. Student Council launched an aggressive debut of the format with outreach for the Course Forum not only tackling traditionally taboo topics, but engaging students through a variety of feedback collection methods. Examples included an online submission box and midday events for students to make submissions on Post-It notes. These tactics relied on collective action effects to draw student participation with the clout of those who had already pitched in. The Mental Health and Residential Life forums tacked on a more interpersonal aspect to this feedback process with some cabinet members hosting informal wing meetings to gather ideas and express opinions. The Mental Health Forum was also a landmark event because it provided the debut of the Support Slips, a project devised by a student who was not on Student Council cabinet. Despite these endeavors, many students criticized the open forums for being too Student Council-centric. The Sodexo Forum experimented with an entirely crowd-oriented approach and disappointed in productivity and results. The Open Forums forced Student Council to consider many issues of communication and outreach and undeniably transformed the way the Council collects feedback, whether in live discussion or asynchronously. Future cabinets will have to strive for a balance over who directs the flow of conversation at such events so that visitors walk away feeling educated as well as heard. The high attendance by faculty at the Course Forum and staff at the Residential Life forum is a reminder that a true “Open Forum,” like those in the golden days of Ancient Rome, must be accessible to all members of the community, not just students.

## Admin at Midday (2014)

After the Course Forum, Student Council invited Dr. Gleason, Director of Academic Programs, to sit at a table in Sodexo during midday and follow up with students for feedback, questions, and ideas in person. Many students responded positively to the event, but few took advantage of it. Dr. Gleason suggested that because a few of his particularly enthusiastic former students sat at his table early on, they may have caused others to shy away. The event bears resemblance to the series of open house format meetings called Lunch with the Teachers. These were held by the 2009 Student Council cabinet to enhance the connection between students and faculty as well as allow students to individually questions teachers about academic rumors.

## The Consortium (2013, 2014)

IMSA is part of the National Consortium for Specialized Secondary Schools of Math, Science, and Technology (NCSSSMST) that includes more than 90 member schools, 1,600 educators, and 40,000 of the country’s so-called “elite” students. A child of this parent organization was the Association of Consortium Student Governments (ACSG), of which IMSA’s Student Council was a leading member. The ACSG exchanged best practices in governing, discussed issues plaguing their institutions, and hosted training and development programs for student leaders. However, in 2013, when IMSA was slated to host an ACSG convention, the organization dissolved due to steadily decreasing participation and funding over the previous five years. The NCSSSMST combines unique institutions based on the experimental value they contribute to the advancement of education and public policy in the world, with key themes ranging from Residential Life and Service Learning, as is emphasized at IMSA, to coping with poverty and sporadic funding cuts. While the individual NCSSSMST schools may be able to get away with remaining divided, the former ACSG members might do well to unify and increase dialogue. In general, interscholastic exchange, even without a formal consortium could benefit IMSA through the study of other forms of government. For example, the 2015 Student Council’s club liaison format is borrowed from the Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (RPI), while IMSA has avoided structures like that of NCSSSMST-member the North Carolina School of Science and Mathematics (NCSSM) which operates under parliamentary procedures and enacts every single one of its projects in bill-form. IMSA might also gain from observing issues that other student government face, like the harsh attendance policy instituted at the Bronx School of Science in New York or the crisis that emerged at the school when students and teachers united to protest against the administration’s launch of inquiry-based learning programs. Participation in the larger community of specialized schools includes not only what IMSA can garner from its neighbors, but our duty to advance the condition of other campuses. In spring 2014, Student Council made plans to invite the Indiana Academy, an NCSSSMST-member, to IMSA so that their severely under-funded Student Life department could learn new strategies for supporting their students and a thriving club culture, something that IMSA is envied for in the Consortium. Student Council should also look to repaying the contributions that schools like the University Laboratory High School in Urbana, Illinois, have made to life and student government at IMSA.

## Acronym Monthly Progress Reports (2017-2018)

After StudStream was discontinued, along with the stagnancy of the StudCo website, StudCo had essentially no means of effectively informing the student body on their project progress. In response, the 2017-18 Cabinet partnered with the Acronym. At the end of each month, a cabinet member would volunteer to write about any notable progress which had occurred. The article would then be sent to the Acronym, IMSA’s student-ran newspaper, where it would be published on their website and advertised on the IMSA Virtual Campus! Facebook group. The progress reports not only provided an opportunity for the IMSA community to stay informed, but also improved internal transparency by facilitating a better flow of information between project groups. This is valuable because one of the most important means of communication StudCo has is personal conversations. Contributing and reading these articles gives members a much more holistic perspective on StudCo progress, which they can share to their peers. An issue that the cabinet found, however, was that the progress reports were often drowned out by other posts on the IMSA Virtual Campus! Facebook group. In addition, the progress reports were not archived in a way that was readily-available to students.

## StudCo Facebook Group (2018-19)

The idea of a StudCo Facebook Group was first on the table early in the 2017-2018 academic year, but did not gain much power when, near the end of the year, the 2018-19 Executive Cabinet decided that it would be beneficial to put StudCo on Facebook. The rationale behind the decision was that StudCo needed a centralized location where their monthly progress reports and announcements would be archived and readily accessible, and StudCo needed to invest in communication methods that required minimal audience initiative. Hence, students would not have to go out of their way to learn more about StudCo. In addition, the Facebook group would allow StudCo to facilitate discussions and hold voting polls. The 2018-19 Executive Cabinet believed that, since IMSA Virtual Campus! is extensively used, a StudCo Facebook group would have the same potential.

The 2018-19 Quality of Life survey results showed that, when asked which sources have contributed to their knowledge of Student Council activities, 24.66% of students said the StudCo Facebook Group, 22.77% said conversations with a Student Council member, 19.71% said the Acronym Articles, 15.48% said Hall General Assemblies, and 7.56% said the StudCo website.

# Relevant Administrators

## Dr. Robert Hernandez, Interim Principal

In addition to his many other responsibilities, Dr. Hernandez also forms the bridge between Student Life and the Principal’s Office, making him an important actor in many major decisions. Dr. Hernandez has many years of experience as he was a former Associate Director of Student Life.

## Dr. Diane Hinterlong, President’s Office Student Liaison

The Principal’s Office exists primarily for academic development among the faculty, but because of the effect their work has on students, the office designates one member a liaison to the student body and student life. Dr. Hinterlong was chosen for this post because of her experience as a teacher, staff member, and a parent.

## The Faculty Senate

At the Academy’s inception, the teachers of IMSA remarkably voted three times not to unionize. Instead, they have adopted a complex leadership structure connected to the Principal’s Office as well as more mobile part to engage faculty opinions on an institutional level. These teachers are known as the Faculty Senate, elected by the faculty to voice their concerns, propose reforms, and communicate administrative decisions.

## Katie Berger, Executive Director of Student Affairs

Mrs. Berger plays a critical role in many of StudCo’s decisions. She frequently collaborates with Student Council members for a wide variety of projects. She temporarily served as Student Council’s advisor for the 2018-19 academic year because of Mrs. Wood’s temporary leave

She interacted regularly with Student Council before 2018-19, but became the organization’s advisor in 2018-19, following Ms. Woods temporary leave.

## Amy Woods, Campus Activities Director

Mrs. Woods has served as Student Council’s advisor for several years until 2018-19, where she took a temporary leave. She resumed her role starting with the 2019-20 school year.

## Brian Cudiamat, IMSA Alumni Association President

Along with the Student Council President, PAC President, and Faculty Representative to the Board of Trustees, Mr. Cudiamat is supposed to receive advance notice of critical institutional decisions.

## Angela Im, Parent Association Council President

The president of the Parent Association Council (PAC) presides over an organization that provides parental outreach, services for IMSA, and a strong source of funding through donations.