

VGS: Building a Statewide Legislative Simulation from an Idea to Final Gavel

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Abstract

After a year of planning and preparation, the first ever intercollegiate Virginia Government Simulation opened with debate on the House of Delegates floor in October 2024. The original conception for VGS was modeled from other intercollegiate legislative simulations, but built on unique perspectives of faculty who were delegates themselves in college, taught simulations, or brought the simulation to life with gavels. This paper examines the strategies, choices, and success of VGS and tackles the learning moments throughout the process. We hope to make the process accessible, so that other faculty can give their students a once in a lifetime experience in their own state model legislatures.

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Literature Review

Simulations have long been opportunities to engage classrooms of students in role play of international events, legislative campaigns and Congressional interactions (Kalaf-Hughes and Mills, 2016; Kahn and Perez, 2009; Coffey, Miller and Feuerstein, 2011). Fewer opportunities have been focused on state level legislative politics (Mallinson, 2018), but for all of these simulations, students are engaged, learn more about processes and key concepts, and are able to create meaningful relationships with each other as they learn.

Simulations are a microcosm of a real-world event or a hypothetical series of events. Simulations can be based in historical events such as the Security Council. All of these opportunities are identified as a high impact practice where young people are able to live the roles and interact meaningfully in their classroom and with their professors (Kuh, 2008).

Students who participate in simulations report higher levels of satisfaction with the course, higher levels of knowledge of key terms, and show in formal assessments to have higher levels of information retention (Kahn and Perez, 2006). Some of the key skills found in simulations include identifying the legislative process, being an advocate for a position and the ability to achieve political goals (Mariani and Glenn, 2014) are essential for all students in a political science classroom.

Simulations are considered active learning opportunities compared to lectures, and students do get more out of the experiences, however students in power roles know more about the process than those in less powerful roles within the simulation (Baranowski and Weir, 2010). These opportunities are invaluable, which is why we wanted to create a state-wide legislative simulation where students could live and interact with one another based on their research on policy and state political party positions.

Team Building

Nobody develops a simulation of this scope alone. A simulation involving hundreds of students from multiple institutions requires a leadership team with a diverse set of skills and perspectives. The team's makeup should include not only a diversity of viewpoints, backgrounds, and institutions represented, but experience and skills. Three main skill sets that set a team up for success are: experience in studying or working in legislatures, simulation and other high-impact pedagogical practices, and logistics and event planning.

Collecting the team members took more than a year. In 2022, the team member with the initial idea began reaching out to faculty members across the state to gauge interest based on a pitch to adapt the Model Illinois Government (MIG) concept in which they had participated as an undergraduate. The team came together through snowball contact. Initially, the faculty member with the idea reached out to all political science department chairs in the Commonwealth of Virginia to gauge interest. The request was accompanied by a secondary one to share the information with others outside of political science they thought might be interested in or to provide specific names of colleagues who they believed might be interested. While that effort resulted in few expressions of interest, the email did get passed around to departments at more than twenty institutions and at some schools the request to participate was shared with departments beyond political science. Over the next two months, the team member followed up with the faculty with whom they had made initial contact, mining contact information and trying to develop a leadership team who would help organize a pilot of the mock legislature. Initially, eight faculty members expressed interest, representing schools that geographically spread the width of the state and whose institutions enrolled roughly 40,000 students. One particularly interested faculty member was significantly involved for four months before

deciding to leave academia. Their replacement was not interested, and the process reverted to culling for partners.

Eventually the three who organized and planned the Virginia Government Simulation connected. Two of the team had experience with MIG, one as a student participant and the other as a faculty advisor. One of the team studies legislatures, partly due to being an undergraduate student participant in MIG. Another member has an extensive background in experiential learning. The third member of the team is in Richmond and directs a democracy-focused office at their university, providing resources, access to the state capitol and the people who make decisions about availability.

The three served as an executive board and planning committee. The executive committee worked together to collect examples and lessons from other similar models, such as those in Illinois and Tennessee.

Planning the First Virginia Government Simulation

The road to launching the inaugural Virginia Government Simulation involved a complex blend of logistical challenges and strategic decisions. Chief among these decisions was selecting an ideal time and location for the simulation. The event needed to align with Virginia's legislative calendar while also accommodating the schedules of participating students and state officials. Proximity to the state capitol was crucial, and VCU's central location proved advantageous in providing easy access for attendees and officials alike. However, ensuring the availability of suitable facilities at VCU and the Capitol required careful coordination. Initially, we secured space to host the simulation at VCU in case the state capitol could not be secured. The Virginia State Capitol is virtually unused during the fall, as the legislative session ends in

the spring of each year, making the fall semester of the academic year the ideal time to hold the simulation.

Beyond securing a date, we had to obtain permission from the VCU Office of Government Relations to formally reach out to the State Capitol and government officials. After securing permission, I reached out to the House Sergeant at Arms to request use of the House Chambers. After some back-and-forth, we agreed on a day and a half for use of the House Chambers at the beginning of October. The opening reception and the initial party caucuses were held at VCU. Involving state officials was key to lending authenticity and legitimacy to the simulation. We secured three guest speakers who provided students with unique perspectives on the legislative process. The involvement of state officials not only added credibility but also provided students with invaluable real-world insights into Virginia's government operations.

One of the early debates among the planning team was deciding whether to model the simulation on a Constitutional Convention or a Legislative Session. Both formats offered unique learning opportunities. A Constitutional Convention would allow students to grapple with the foundational aspects of Virginia's governance, while a Legislative Session would focus more on the day-to-day realities of lawmaking. Upon consideration, the team decided that a legislative session would be ideal for the first simulation for several reasons. First, the short timeline to prepare students for the simulation in the fall made it difficult to fully prepare them to engage in a Constitutional Convention. This level of engagement would require each school's delegation to come fully prepared to engage in debate and to write a comprehensive governing document. Many schools did not have a faculty advisor or a full delegation for the inaugural simulation, making it likely that some participants would have been underprepared for the experience of a Constitutional Convention.

Second, a legislative session provided an additional shortcut – the ability to use legislation from the 2024 Virginia General Assembly session as the basis for the 2024 simulation Bill Book. While we ultimately envision a program where delegations write and submit their own legislation, we felt that for the first iteration of this program, a prepackaged Bill Book would be the best approach. By having the bills for the Bill Book pre-selected, we were able to focus our limited time and resources in the lead-up to the simulation on preparing students for rules of debate and expectations for decorum. By focusing on just a few key components, we felt better prepared to pull off the simulation in a short timeframe. This spring, we are working to build additional core skills at our regional meetings – specifically, how to write a bill and how to reconcile legislation. By slowly building skills in a scaffolded manner, we ensure a better simulation experience for the students.

Securing Funding and Financial Considerations

There are significant direct and indirect costs that need to be considered when starting a simulation of this scale. A critical factor in the success of the VGS was the unwavering support from the Institute for Democracy, Pluralism, and Community Empowerment (IDPCE) at VCU. Beyond the logistical advantages of being based in close proximity to Virginia's state capitol, IDPCE committed substantial in-kind and up-front financial support to the initiative. This support ranged from providing venue space, technical resources, and logistical coordination, to paying for student meals during the simulation. In addition, IDPCE created and maintains the event's website, which serves as a hub for information about the simulation.¹ The institute also committed substantial personnel resources to ensure the event's success, with faculty and staff

¹ The website can be viewed at <<https://idpce.vcu.edu/va-government-simulation/>>.

dedicating hours of work to various aspects of the simulation, from planning to execution. Figure 1 is an example of in-kind work provided by VCU. This VGS logo was selected from a variety of options provided to IDPCE by VCU's College of Humanities and Sciences. Figure 1 is the VGS logo selected by the executive committee. VCU's College of Humanities and Sciences provided several logo options to select from. The logo was printed on stickers, paid for by IDPCE, that were given to all participants at the inaugural simulation.

Figure 1. VGS Logo Provided by VCU



In total, the estimated direct and indirect costs to VCU associated with starting the simulation is approximately \$40,000-\$45,000. This cost covered everything from the venue and catering to the time spent on administrative tasks and coordination efforts related to the simulation. We did charge a small registration fee for the simulation - \$25 – but the estimated direct cost for each participant was closer to \$80 (food and venue costs only).

As the simulation approached, it became clear that additional support was needed to ensure a smooth operation. To address this need, IDPCE hired a Research Assistant through the Federal Work-Study program. The RA played a critical role in the success of the inaugural simulation, managing key responsibilities such as assisting with preparing the Bill Book and Rules & Procedures, reaching out to faculty and students at all universities, colleges, and community colleges within 20 minutes of Richmond, Virginia to solicit participation, and creating and running the VCU VGS club. Table 1 provides estimates for the various direct and indirect costs associated with starting the simulation.

Table 1. Estimates Related to Direct and Indirect Costs	
Item	Estimated Cost
Food – 1 dinner and 1 lunch for 60	\$2,500
Printing & Supplies	\$1,200
Rental & Technology Fees	\$500
VGS Stickers and Keychains	\$1,200
Gavels	\$200
Website	\$7,500
Personnel Costs	\$25-30k

Moving forward, IDPCE is actively fundraising to offset the costs associated with future simulations. Ideally, this program will eventually be fully funded and will cover all costs for students attending the simulation - travel, housing, food - each year. For the inaugural

simulation, institutions and students were responsible for costs associated with travel to and from the simulation and housing.

Pre-Simulation Preparation for Students

The lead-up to the simulation can be thought of in three phases: research and development, promotion and securing participation, and final pre-simulation preparation. Each phase built on the previous ones as an intentional effort to prepare students for an experience that none had participated in, and few of them had even visualized. Students would need to be prepared to simulate the work of legislators. Since the simulation was not embedded in a class, there was no common frame of reference or ability to assume preparation

Research and Development

Without the existence of MIG, the simulation may never have occurred. MIG provided the initial impetus for the idea, and it also provides a wealth of information for those who wish to emulate it. Relatively few states have statewide mock legislatures, but the team did learn of the Tennessee Instructional State Legislature (TISL) in addition to MIG. The combination of MIG and TISL provided exemplary structures from which the team could build the logistics of the simulation.

MIG not only provided the inspiration for VGS, but it provided a wealth of materials to help plan the simulation. The team spent its time initially reviewing MIG's forty-year history and its growth. Not only did MIG provide a model bicameral legislature in Illinois, but it also had a fully developed state executive and judicial branch. Over time, MIG added journalists and lobbyists as well, creating a complex and rich simulation ecosystem.

TISL has been in place for more than twenty years, so like MIG it has a developed culture that includes the ability to pre-file bills by legislators and hold interim committee meetings. Such a complex and populated system seemed too ambitious for the first iteration of VGS, so the team made a few decisions to keep the logistics controlled. First, the inaugural VGS session would feature a unicameral legislature. The team anticipated fewer than one hundred participants, which corresponds to the size of the House of Delegates chamber in Virginia. Therefore, we made the legislature a single chamber with plans to expand to both chambers starting with the 2025 VGS session. Second, we opted to not elect a state Governor or Lieutenant Governor for the 2024 session, either beforehand or during the session. The team believed that developing the skills to markup legislation was paramount, and that if the session was successful an election for executive officers for the 2025 session was feasible. Third, we decided to include a group of journalists, as the MIG simulation does. Students at one of the participating institutions expressed interest in reporting on the simulation, and the team followed that interest in providing opportunities for reporters to include stories on the session.

Promotion

With limited time and budget constraints, the team needed to start with their own universities. Approximately one-third of all eventual participants would come from the three universities represented by the executive committee members. The goal is to create a statewide entity with participation well beyond the core schools, so the team used social media and word-of-mouth to communicate to students. The team reached out to every Political Science and History department to request they promote the opportunity to participate in VGS to their students, and that resulted in a total of nine different institutions being represented by students.

Final Pre-Simulation Preparation

One common thread in simulations is a set of rules and regulations guiding conduct during the session. Not only did the team have MIG and TISL for exemplary bylaws, but the high school level YMCA model legislature which runs annually in Virginia as well. The rules and procedures followed, as MIG, TISL, and YMCA did, the standard procedures of the state legislature. The same majority rules for offering amendments, bill markup, and parliamentary procedures were collected and reviewed by the faculty team to establish procedural authority. The rules and procedures also included a Code of Conduct to ensure comity and collegiality were visible values for participants.

The team had one significant limitation compared with MIG and TISL. Since there was no ‘last year’ on which to rely for participants, there would be no opportunity for students to craft and pre-file bills for consideration. Therefore, the team decided to collect a body of existing bills from the 2024 Virginia legislature and include them in a pre-constructed bill book for participants.

Each of the three leadership team members selected a set of bills they wanted to include in the bill book. The criteria established by the team included bill brevity, to manage the students’ pre-simulation workload; topically interesting content, which prompted the team to select bills on artificial intelligence, legacy admission to universities, driving under the influence punishments, taxes on plastic bags, human trafficking, and absentee voting as examples. A total of thirty bills were included in a bill book provided to all accepted applicants to the 2024 VGS session.

One cannot expect students to enter the simulation without prior work, however. In addition to briefing themselves on the bill book and procedures, the students would need to have

some knowledge of what they would do on-site. The team organized a Zoom call for all participants two weeks before the beginning of the session to review all of the materials, discuss logistics, and cover one of the most important elements they would need to know during the simulation: parliamentary procedure.

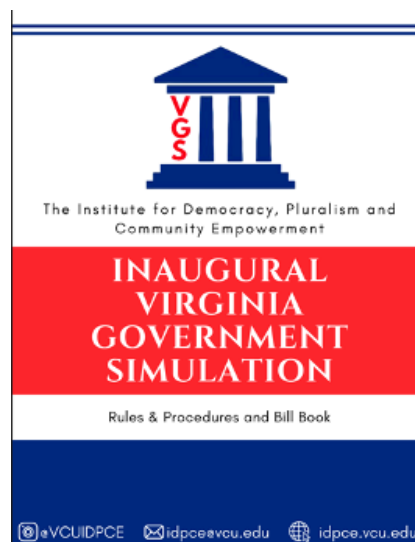
Since two of the faculty members on the executive team have backgrounds in either legislative work or parliamentary procedure, the team adapted materials they had created for their classes to create a primer for participating students to share. One of the future improvement goals for the simulation is to have students role-play briefly during the pre-session call so they are actually familiar with how parliamentary procedure works in practice prior to arrival at the simulation.

In-person simulation process

In the days leading up to the simulation, IDPCE staff worked to create the final program, print name tags and table tents for each participant, and put together materials for each participant.

Figure 2 is a screenshot of the official bill book.

Figure 2. Title Page of the Bill Book



The simulation itself took place over the course of three days – Thursday evening, Friday, and Saturday morning. As you can see from Figure 3, the simulation began with an optional tour of the Virginia State Capitol. After the tour, participants were given a break so that they could check-in to their hotel and change for the opening reception, which took place at VCU.

Figure 3. Schedule of Events Page from the Official Program

SCHEDULE OF EVENTS		SCHEDULE OF EVENTS	
Thursday, October 3		Friday, October 4	
1:00 – 2:00 pm	Optional tour of the State Capitol Building	4:00 – 5:00 pm	Party Caucus: Determine slate of nominees for 2025 Legislative Session
4:00 – 5:30 pm	Registration – STEM Building, North Commons	5:00 – 6:30 pm	Faculty Advisor Mixer, Sine Irish Pub, Hosted by Scholars Strategy Network
5:30 – 6:30 pm	Dinner and Opening Remarks by Chris Piper, Executive Director of VPAP, STEM, room 216	Saturday, October 5	
6:30 – 6:45 pm	Break	8:45 am	Arrive at the VA State Capitol, 1000 Bank Street
6:45 – 7:45 pm	Party Caucuses & Leadership Elections • Republican Delegation STEM, Room 110 • Democratic Delegation STEM, Room 112	9:00 – 10:30 am	Elections for 2025 Constitutional Officers, Vote on the Format of the 2025 Legislative Session
7:45 – 8:00 pm	Break	10:30 – 10:45 am	Break
8:00 – 9:00 pm	Committee of the Whole, STEM, room 216	10:45 – 11:00 am	Program Wrap-Up
Friday, October 4		11:00 am	Closing remarks and Q&A with Delegate Betsy Carr
8:45 am	Arrive at the VA State Capitol, 1000 Bank Street		
9:00 – 10:00 am	William H. "Bill" Leighty, chief of staff to Governors Mark Warner and Tim Kaine of Virginia		
10:00 – 11:00 am	Second Committee of the Whole		
11:00 – 12:00 pm	Report Bills Out		
12:00 – 1:30 pm	Lunch (provided), House Room 1, 1st Floor below the House Chamber		
1:30 – 4:00 pm	Floor Sessions		
3:30 – 4:45 pm	Faculty Roundtable on teaching public engagement with Erin Hill from VPAP, House Room 1, 1st Floor below the House Chamber		

Upon arrival at VCU for the opening reception, students were provided with their name tag and a folder containing all relevant information and materials. These materials included a folder with a QR code to the digital Bill Book, a copy of the program, and a cheat sheet to help participants navigate the Rules & Procedures. We then proceeded to party caucuses where participants elected the majority and minority leaders and whips. Students were randomly

assigned a party position when they registered for the event, so they knew their party assignment going into the simulation and had prepared for debate based on those assignments. Once party leadership roles were established, students set about creating their bill list for debate. By 9:00 pm on Thursday night, the leadership for the parties had agreed upon a bill order, the committee of the whole voted to approve the order, and we adjourned for the evening.

On Friday morning, we convened at 9am at the Virginia State Capitol. We began our day with a speech and Q&A with the esteemed William “Bill” Leighty, one of Virginia's longest serving public servants. This was a unique opportunity for students to interact with and ask questions about working in government.² Students then proceeded to debate on legislation. One note of interest was that the students selected eight bills for debate on Friday under faculty guidance. Debate on these bills went more quickly than anticipated and the parties had to go back into caucus to determine a second slate of bills to finish out the day. We rounded out our simulation on Saturday morning with amendments to the Rules & Procedures, elections for Governor and Lt. Governor for the 2025 simulation, and student awards.

Throughout the event, daily emails were sent to participants, reminding them of the schedule of events and summarizing the key moments from the previous day. These emails served as both a logistical tool and a way to keep students engaged and informed about the simulation’s progress. In addition, these daily emails provided summaries and links to the articles written by the student press corps. See Figure 4 for an example of a daily VGS email.

Figure 4. Sample Daily VGS Email

² We’d like to express our sincere thanks to Jay Pearson, the Virginia House of Delegates Sergeant at Arms. Jay skillfully guided the student through the ins and outs of debate and parliamentary procedure. The simulation would not have been nearly as successful without him.

Dear VGS Participants,

As we near the final day of the inaugural Virginia Government Simulation (VGS) program, we wanted to send a friendly reminder for **Saturday, October 5th** at the **Virginia State Capitol**. Please plan to arrive by **8:45 AM**, as the program will begin promptly at 9:00 AM.

Saturday, October 5th - At the Virginia State Capitol

Entrance: All participants should enter at **1000 Bank Street, Richmond, VA**.

Schedule of Events:

9:00 – 10:30 AM: Elections for 2025 Constitutional Officers and Vote on the Format of the 2025 Legislative Session

- Delegates, Cast Your Votes!** Be sure to vote by 8:00 am for the Rising Star Award and the Future Delegate Award.
- Rising Star Award:** This award recognizes a new member of the simulation who has shown remarkable promise, dedication, and enthusiasm. Voted on by their peers, the recipient has made a strong impression in their debut, displaying great potential for future leadership and impact within VGS.
- Future Delegate Award:** Voted on by the students, this award is given to the individual who is most likely to become a future legislator. The recipient has shown a strong grasp of legislative processes, displayed a passion for policy, and demonstrated qualities that suggest they are destined for a successful career in public service.

10:30 – 11:00 AM: Program Wrap-Up

- A brief recap and review of the VGS program.
- 11:00 AM: Closing Remarks and Q&A with Delegate Betsy Carr**
 - Delegate Carr will share her insights and answer any questions as we conclude our program.

12:00 PM: Adjourn

From the VGS Press Corps:

Below is an overview of today's simulation and highlights of the event from the VGS Press Corps. Special thanks to members of the press for composing these. They have also included articles delving deeper into specific aspects of the simulation.

By Jonathan Arhin, Elizabeth Burzumato, Luis Gutierrez Palacios, Luke Lewis, and Tony Lucy.

The second day of the Virginia Government Simulation (VGS) started at 09:00 AM with the introduction of William H. "Bill" Leighty, who gave an inaugural speech and touched base on his personal life, what it means to work alongside government officials, and opened the floor for questions.



The billboard in the chamber that shows if the bill was passed. In this case, the billboard depicts 19-17 in favor of passing the Bill.

The deliberation over House Bill 318: Virginia Firearm Industry Standards of Responsible Conduct proposed allowing local governments to sue the seller or manufacturer of a firearm for restitution related to injuries caused by that weapon. After a back-and-forth exchange between delegates and proposals for amendments, the decision was made to continue deliberations the following day. However, in the context of the simulation, the matter was settled after lunch.



Democrat Delegate Riley Johnson from Radford (standing, holding a microphone), addressing the Majority Leader (off-screen), Jory Cardoza, explaining his party's position.



William H. "Bill" Leighty opened the Virginia Government Simulation with a speech (He is speaking in the chamber in front of the student delegates.)

A remarkable moment occurred when he described the nature of his job and the importance of his role in working for government officials such as Mark Warner. He explained, "Your job is to know the question that will ever be asked." Emphasizing the value of relationships, he added, "Build a network of trust and openness. After the speech, the time for the issuing of Bills began. Majority Leader Jory Cardoza took the lead in the assembly by stimulating discussion and effectively ruling to ensure delegates presented their arguments through debate, and they did not disappoint.



Majority Leader Jory Cardoza from Bridgewater College assumes his role as speaker.

A lively exchange of ideas as delegates passionately defended their positions. The atmosphere buzzed with intellectual energy as differing viewpoints clashed, yet everyone remained committed to finding common ground and advancing meaningful legislation.

Although the Bills were evenly distributed, opinions were sharply divided, leading to intense deliberations. Some Bills passed with unanimous support, while others saw close, heated decisions—sometimes coming down to just a single vote.

On the other hand, deliberation over House Bill 6004: Electronic Gambling, saw a unanimous decision. Along with the Bill, a few amendments were proposed and accepted by the delegates who saw this as an opportunity to work together and get the Bill passed without any difficulty.

An entertaining journey full of arguments culminated with the victory of the Democratic Party over the Republican Party. Students enjoyed the role-play simulation, and look forward to setting a precedent for new students to join in future years. Delegate Jarrett Lily from Bridgewater College highlighted the importance of this program. "It's an amazing opportunity for future leaders from different colleges to get exposure to real issues we will encounter as citizens and some as politicians in the future."

Additional Articles from the Press Corps:

[Frustrations & Tensions Arise Within the Virginia Government Simulation](#)

[Feed the People: The Bridgewater College Delegation and Senate Bill 110](#)

[The Divide on the Republican Party](#)

We look forward to seeing you bright and early for this exciting final day at the Capitol! Thank you for your continued participation and enthusiasm throughout VGS.

Best regards,

—
Amanda Wintersieck | Ph.D.

Lessons Learned

For our next iteration, we will work on integrating more of the journalists into production elements. Journalists in the simulation were eager to write, evaluate, and ask critical questions of the legislators. However, they could have been used earlier in the simulation and could have

received additional training from actual journalists from the field, which were invited to the simulation. Providing concrete training for journalists would have produced innovative student run stories from the simulation and put more students at ease for their roles within the simulation. Moreover, we plan to set limits on the number of student journalists from each institution and create expectations that these participants be student journalists at their respective institutions with a plan to file a story about the simulation with their student newspaper.

Dealing with controversy at the simulation was another important aspect for a lesson learned. Creating a code of conduct that addresses important aspects of leadership, professional behavior, and how to address those who do not meet the standards of behavior of the legislative body. Because so many schools were involved, different expectations for decorum were present. Because this was an inaugural event, reflection on what worked with establishing decorum and what did not was an important lesson. Often it is difficult to have students' police themselves with appropriate behavior, and our code of conduct was too general to address certain challenges. In addition, it is important to set expectations about cultural differences. Some of our minority students expressed reservation speaking in front of, and interacting with, the all-white delegations from other institutions. Likewise, we experienced some communication hiccups along a rural/urban divide. We acknowledge that it will be a challenge to balance creating and enforcing a comprehensive code of conduct, without becoming overly involved in the politics that will inevitably arise among students and delegations.

Respect for others' dress was one key element of the lessons learned. Some students dressed how they presented in their non-normative gender identity, and this was looked down upon by other students because these students were not dressed how they were "supposed to be" rather than general acceptance of all legislators.

Finally, as the simulation grows and we have broader participation from institutions across the state, we will need to devise a plan for allocation of the limited seats available (100 in the House of Delegates, 40 in the Senate, and about a dozen seats for journalists). Like TISL, we plan to use a system of proportional allocation based on size of each school, with a minimum of 2 seats and a maximum of about 18. In addition, we plan to allow students to indicate their party preferences. Some participants reported that they could not debate in good faith on a number of pieces of legislation for which they deeply disagreed with. While we're likely unable to guarantee a favorable party position - as we aim to be faithful to the make-up of the actual state legislature - we do think that taking preferences into account will increase the enjoyability of the experience for students.

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