

# CHAPTER BUILDING & STUDENT ORGANIZING BASICS

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This pamphlet distributed by DC Students for a Democratic Society.

DC Students for a Democratic Society is an action-oriented student and youth power network devoted to collective liberation within ourselves, our schools, and our communities. DC SDS uses participatory democracy and takes direction from community-based organizations to create positive change.

You can contact DC SDS on our website at <http://www.dc-sds.org>

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AT THE NATIONAL CONVENTION THIS SUMMER, SDS PASSED A VISION DOCUMENT affirming that we conceive of ourselves as organizers. So what does it mean to be an organizer? Organizing is fundamental to building a successful movement for social change. Activism is applying pressure to create change; organizing is building in others the capacity to create change, as well as identifying and forging avenues for people to create change together. Organizing is about building power for the long haul by engaging a broad base and facilitating the participation of more and more people. Good organizing means seeing the big picture and advancing the group forward, developing its analysis, building leadership in members, and thinking strategically about your group's place in the broader movement.

Organizing also means assessing what is the most important and strategic role for you given the context, and being able to step in to fill it or step back and let others do so when appropriate. In this way, organizing takes many different forms, such as envisioning and strategizing campaigns, building coalitions with other groups, identifying the training needs of your group, networking, writing and publishing, recruiting key people into the group, coordinating actions, speaking publicly, developing a media strategy, working on internal structure, or keeping track of what tasks other folks are working on and following up, etc.

Wanting to win means that we need millions of people involved - so we have a lot of organizing to do! If you're currently building or growing a chapter, you have already started organizing! So, how can we build our chapters in ways that create more space for involvement, bring in new people, nurture voices, and turn out even more organizers for social change? Here are some tips and tricks for organizers:

## Be Strategic

Keep the big picture in mind! Think about what outcome you want and how you realistically plan to get there. Be intentional. Work on the issues most relevant to your base. Work with the folks who you are best positioned to mobilize. Break your big goals into smaller, bite-sized achievements that can be accomplished - and make a timeline! This will help build a sense of power as they accomplish those achievements, and will build momentum to help accomplish longer-term goals. Think about your own role in your local organization as well as your organization's role in coalitions and the broader movement.

## **Build Relationships**

Building relationships with and among people is one of the most basic pieces of organizing. Strive to build friendships with folks who you want to organize with. More than any other reason, people join social movements because they know someone already involved. Network! Actively seek out connections with a wide variety of people - those on your campus or at your school, in your community, the media, and in other local, regional, and national organizations. Befriend your student body president. Get to know your city council. Don't be shy - invite folks who you'd like to work with to sit down to talk. Engage folks who you wouldn't normally spend time with - it is important to keep expanding your circle of allies and interested folks who you can mobilize or work with.

### **Do Work!**

Run campaigns! Doing actual on-the-ground work with the purpose of creating concrete change is the best way to build a group and bring in more people. Rather than spending a four months focusing on recruiting more people, recognize that people will be attracted to a group that is active, showing results, and plans to win.

## **Pass On What You Know**

When you leave school, you are at the peak of your student organizing skills - and this is when we need you most! Find ways to continue to develop less experienced folks. A good organizer is someone who builds a strong organization that will stay strong even after they've left - if your group collapses after you leave, then what have you really accomplished? Return to your school or group and offer trainings. Have one-on-one meetings with friends. Be available for advice - but don't be overbearing.

## **“Diversity”**

Building relationships is more important than trying to simply “diversify” your organization. In other words, don’t just invite people to join your group because you think a diversity of genders, ages, races/ethnicities, etc. will give you more credibility. Incorporate anti-oppression/collective liberation into your organizing (and your analysis). Work through your own racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism, etc. rather than pretending that you don’t have any. Create loving spaces for your friends and cohorts to work through their own. See what other folks (and the groups they may already belong to) are doing, and put in time helping their efforts. Building coalitions is just as important as building membership. Remember to be transparent with and accountable to other groups.

## **Create Infrastructure**

Ensure that there is a functional infrastructure for the organization, and that everyone is aware of and knows how to use what’s available - this can include group documents/policies, office and storage spaces, websites/blogs, email and contact lists, etc. Keep an action box handy that has all of the things you need to make posters, banners, etc so you don’t have to buy new stuff every time. Keep good records. Preserve the history of your group through websites/wikis, scrapbooks, binders, and faculty advisors, community members, and others who will be available to the group for a long time.

## **First Meeting**

Sit in circles, not classroom style. Tell a story about the history of your organization. Collect as much information on people as possible - pass around index cards and ask for their name, phone, email, interests (including their major), graduation date (if they’re in school) and home contact info. Use the graduation date or home info to track them after they’re gone. You can use this growing alumni base for fundraising and build pressure on your targets over time. Have a fun activity (like banner making or a team building game) at the end of the meeting. Plug folks in immediately.

## **Recruiting & Retaining Membership**

We want SDS to be a group that any young person could see themselves joining. Introduce new members into pre-existing social networks and work to build friendships, since this will keep people attached to your group. Avoid cliques and ingroups. Spend one-on-one time with people new to your group. Make sure to ask what they feel excited about, and support their interest. Do lunch or dinner with different members rather than with your same group of friends each time. Listen at least as much as you talk. Explain decisionmaking process and hand gestures at every meeting. Recruit new members through actions rather than to meetings - who wants their first experience with a group to be a painstaking business meeting?

## **Outreach is a Constant Process!**

Make what you're doing a household word. Pick a simple, effective message and repeat it! Don't assume that people are going to hear about it through the same channels that you did. Be creative. Outreach should be fun and ongoing. Be very conscious of the image that you are projecting and strive to be inclusive and engage a wide range of people. Use language that everyone is familiar with - avoid activist lingo, acronyms, and unnecessarily loaded terms. Always be consciously building the base of folks you are able to mobilize and your circle of allies.

### **"An Action a Day..."**

Action is application of the power you have built through organizing, and it is essential for a group to be successful. Try to always have an action on the horizon. Use actions (rather than meetings) to recruit new members. Be visible. Be creative. Use humor, theater, props, etc. But most of all, be strategic. Know when you are using a tactic or action to express your groups' values versus when you are using it as an instrumental part of your campaign to put pressure on your target or build power.

Ultimately, keep your long-term goals in mind.

## **Plug People in With Specific Tasks**

Get people involved by asking them to do things. Mass communication is impersonal and doesn't usually work; instead, ask specific people to do specific things that you think they'd be good at. Always ask in person if you can. Phone should be your second option, and email should be your last. If asking by email, personalize email subject lines so that the person's name is in it. Start with small, bite-sized things and gradually grow with their increased showing of responsibility. When helping find roles for new folks or building leadership in others remember that what is just another task to you may be an opportunity for growth for another person. Offer people tasks and projects that they are prepared for, have the capacity and experience to take on, and that they are excited about in order to build their confidence.

## **Provide for Different Levels of Involvement**

Not everyone is going to be able to contribute to the work that you're doing at the same level of intensity and that you are. Be careful not to project your own level of commitment onto every member. Create several different avenues through which people can be involved, whether by simply keeping up with your work through listservs/newsletters, giving money, participating in actions, tabling here and there, or taking a leadership role if they decide that they are able to do so. Not everyone will be comfortable with every tactic your group might use - someone who's not into civil disobedience might be a really awesome canvasser, fundraiser or media person. There is a role for everyone! Try to create space where everyone has something to contribute.

## **Avoid Leader-less-ness:**

A commitment to horizontal process doesn't mean pretending that there aren't different levels of leadership that people take on, based on capacity, time, commitment, experience, etc. We always need defined positions with accountability to the group, and there are many different kinds of leadership. For example, public roles such as spokespersoning, or task coordinating, as well as less visible roles such as emotional support work or big-picture thinking, and so on. Learn how to share power. Build transparency with regards to how decisions are being made and roles are being assigned; rotate workload often enough to assure that no one person is taking on too much, but also strive to maintain continuity. Remember that accountability also means that general membership takes personal responsibility to be partners in transparency - that is taking initiative to learn and be involved, not just sitting back and criticizing or "calling people out."

## **Develop More Leaders!**

Once you feel confident stepping up, help other folks feel confident stepping up too. Creating space for more leaders is important, but that doesn't mean that you need to disappear. Be intentional about developing leadership (skills, analysis, confidence, strategic thinking) in other folks in your group, particularly folks who are not traditionally socialized to take on leadership positions. Share skills, information and responsibilities as widely as possible. Don't do something alone when you can help someone gain skills by teaming up with them - not only will you be building the capacity of our movement through training and inspiring others, but you'll make your group more sustainable.

## **Pick Proper Targets**

Do what's called "power mapping" - learn who has the power to give you what you want. Don't waste your time targeting your school's president, if it's the board of trustees who really make the decisions. Consult the Midwest Academy's Strategy Charts to outline your goals, organizational considerations, allies/opponents, targets and tactics.

## **Escalate Tactics**

The purpose of escalating tactics is to leverage power. Make the cost of not granting your demands greater in terms of public relations, money, staff time, headaches, etc. than the cost of giving you what you want. You must cause your target to consciously make a choice about your issue. Start with a meeting to ask your target for what you want directly, and if they refuse, apply more pressure the more you are ignored or denied. This may look like moving from meetings to petitions to theatrical actions to walk-outs, sit-ins, etc. Put your requests in writing and try to get any denials in writing, if possible, so that you have a record of your attempt and your target's refusal to be reasonable. Make sure to get media so that the target looks unreasonable and feels public pressure.

## Use the Media

Media attention is fundamental both to growing your group and pressuring your target. Get to know your local media before you need them to cover your event. Get media training for your whole group. Plan a media strategy for your campaigns. Write media advisories and press releases for actions and big events. Make sure your spokespeople are prepared before interviews. It's important to have a unified message to the press, even if it's just the campus paper. Seek wide appeal. Use community media as well as campus media - community media is often the most effective place to embarrass a university.

## Institutionalize Change

Many activists tend to do expressive protest or education and consciousness-raising events, intended to shift culture, but have no demands that can be institutionalized, so they fail to make concrete wins that help build power. An example of this is hosting a number of speakers against the war vs. forcing your school to divest from war profiteers. Organizing for institutional changes allows you to create concrete and permanent/long-term successes that you can build on, like steps. With each win, you build more power so you can move on to bigger demands, and you don't waste energy doing the same things over and over.

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## Praxis Makes Perfect!

Build education and reflection into your organization. Debrief after meetings, actions and campaigns and think critically about what you could do better. This will help your group to build analysis, increase organizing skills, deepen commitment to the work you're doing, and become more self-actualizing. Take advantage of potential learning experiences (conferences, trainings, meetings, study groups), and bring other group members along!

## Don't Re-Invent the Wheel:

It's not up to you to do everything! Spend some initial time before you begin your project investigating who's already working on what you're interested in, or at least who might be sympathetic. Do this throughout your project so that you can build coalition with others rather than having to compete for scarce resources. Before making that counter-recruitment flyer or workshop outline, check out the materials of other organizations and see if you can use or adapt theirs.

## Find Mentors:

Actively seek out mentors who have been organizing for a long time and who come from different perspectives from you. Remember that each generation finds itself in a different political moment, but insights from those with more experience can help us learn from the past and deepen our analysis. Also seek out peer-mentors who you can grow and develop with. Don't be afraid to let folks know what you need and are looking for in mentorship as to not waste each others' time, but also have patience with people who offer you their time. Everyone with some experience has a responsibility to pass on what they know - so remember to mentor other folks, too!

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