

## The Student Power Cycle

By Aaron Kreider  
aaron@campusactivism.org  
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One of the most critical parts of strategizing for a campaign is the creation of a timeline. Unfortunately there is little existing documentation that adequately addresses how to create a timeline and especially to deal with the unique factors that affect student activist campaigns. I believe that we can determine a useful timeline for our campaigns by using our experience as students, as student organizers and analyzing the troughs and peaks of past student movements. For most colleges this means that by timing our campaigns to peak in March through April (or if that is not possible in late October through November) we will maximize our power and our ability to succeed.

### **Campaign Phases: Combining Action and Education**

A simplistic strategy for winning a campaign would be to divide your time into two phases. During the first phase you would tell everyone about the problem (education), and in the second you would engage in action that would mobilize everyone and then you would win.

However, you need a more complex strategy to maximize your chances of success – one that recognizes the need to integrate action and education into the same phases. First you need to do initial research about the issue so that you have your facts straight (note: you should continue to do research as the campaign progresses). Now while you can start off a campaign focussing on research and education, if you do not move relatively quickly to a combined action and education phase then you risk demobilizing your supporters because you are failing to present an action plan that would provide your organization with a reasonable chance of achieving its goals. Many people will rightfully suspect that a group with a purely educational campaign that relies upon making a moral or rational appeal to a powerful elite is deluding itself! These individuals will either join another organization that has a better strategy or stay away from activism.

Thus from the beginning of your campaign, you want it to be clear in the minds of your group's members, supporters, possible new recruits, and your target(s) that you will engage in a campaign that will rock your school and/or community with ACTION. Your movement will be mobilizing hundreds of people, building and demonstrating power, and that is why you have a good chance of winning.

The powerful tonic for success combines action with education. You have action to mobilize people, to demonstrate your power, to keep things exciting, and to show that you mean "business". Meanwhile you constantly incorporate education into your campaign. At first your educational goal is simply to demonstrate that there is a PROBLEM to a modest sized group of students. Bad stuff is going down and you have a realistic solution for how students can fix it. You need to get enough supporters so that you can engage in major actions, such as rallies, without being embarrassed by a lack of attendance.

As your campaign progresses, you will be able to expand the reach of your educational activities from beyond targeting the usual suspects (liberal and progressive students) to finding ways of involving students who would normally be moderate, apathetic, and even conservatives. If your issue is being debated all over the student newspaper, on the walls and sidewalks of your school with posters and chalk, by speakers, and in leafleting, protests, and other actions – then students who normally avoid political involvement will become interested. I found evidence for this in my research on student anti-sweatshop sit-ins, where as the sit-ins progressed students, who had not protested during the past two years joined in these high-risk sit-in actions.

In addition, as your campaign progresses and grows your members will be better prepared to educate others. They shall be able to provide both a simple argument that will convince most people why you are correct, as well as a lengthier analysis of how this issue is connected to other issues and how your goal is a small step in a larger movement to change society. Your education effort will move from a simple to a more complex and accurate explanation of the problem, perhaps as you are aided by additional research and comparing notes with activists on other campuses. It will become obvious to anyone on campus that you and your group really know your stuff!

## **Escalation**

While you are combining action and education, you enter a cyclical process of introducing and publicizing reasonable demands to your target, the media, and your school, having these demands turned down, and escalating your action and education until you achieve your goals or reach a suitable compromise. Initially you might want to write your school president (or other target) a simple letter with your concerns and your goals. You might also request a meeting to discuss the issue. If your target accepts your requests, congratulations you may have won (But be careful to ensure that they implement what they promise!).

Unfortunately, your request will typically be ignored or denied. In this case, you need to demonstrate that you have support for your cause. You may want to demonstrate your support using traditional institutions like student government and faculty senate to grant your cause legitimacy. You may also want to demonstrate that the masses are on your side with a petition. If you are still being denied, you may want to do a referendum, one or more mass demonstrations, and ultimately consider civil disobedience (such as a sit-in).

You might not want to enter a cycle of endless escalation. In some situations it can be strategic to take a step back. For instance, if it appears that your target is granting serious consideration to your demands, you might want to reduce your level of confrontation and give them a chance to change their position. You do not want to make it extremely difficult for them to grant your demands. On the other hand, you do not want to completely withdraw pressure – as they may just be stalling for time.

## **Innovation**

During your campaign, you should try to innovate so as to keep your target guessing and worried, to maximize your power, to keep your constituency interested and mobilized, to have fun, and to maximize your press coverage. Innovation does not require brilliant ideas. Most innovation is simply stealing an idea that worked at other place or at another time but has not been done recently at your school. At a school where activism is rare, holding a traditional rally could count as innovation – you could be the first group that school year to mobilize fifty people! Chalking on the sidewalks, putting up several hundred dramatic posters, passing out leaflets, or just writing a letter to the editor can all be radical innovative acts at inactive schools. You might want to do something like have twenty students sit-in at an office (either for a couple hours, days, or weeks), get a thousand students to wear armbands, create a tent city, sponsor a class boycott, or do another activity that will catch people's attention.

Tactic innovation has been a great boon to student movements whether it was sitting-in at lunch counters to fight segregation, draft-card burning, going on strike (as millions of students did in May 1970, divesting from South African apartheid, occupying buildings (Ontario students in 1997), sitting-in to oppose sweatshops, or putting on a play (Vagina Monologues). Generally each new tactic, if it is a good idea, leads to a surge in activism.

You can also innovate in your forms of education. Perhaps you might want to focus on a different aspect of the issue every week, so that you appeal to different groups of people, your message stays interesting, and you overwhelm your opposition and apathetic students with reasons for why your issue matters.

## **Winning**

If you have won, it is time to celebrate your victory, perhaps analyze your achievements and failures, and to move on to the next campaign. If you are about to win a campaign, you may want to start small actions against similar targets to which your campaign could be extended. For instance, if you are working for a wage increase you could target additional employers in your community.

## **Losing**

What do you do if you did not win? Perhaps you simply had to fight the good fight in the hopes that your activism will lead to a future win, or that by fighting you will educate students about an important issue (like US imperialism) and train yourself and your fellow group members how to organize campaigns. Perhaps you underestimated the opposition and overestimated how much students would care about the issue. If this is the case, then you might want to simply move on to another issue where you can mobilize many more people and will have a better chance of winning.

If the issue is the best one for your organization to fight (if it can mobilize the most people, have a chance of a success, and winning will have important permanent effects on your members and your school), then you need to analyze what you could do better the next time.

Be careful to avoid non-strategic escalation and martyring yourself for this cause. You may find this particularly appealing if you are about to graduate and you feel that this is the last chance for your movement to succeed. However, a tiny group of people engaging in extremely radical action (for instance property destruction or violence against people) will generally destroy any chance your campaign has of success by alienating your supporters. If you cannot convince the upcoming leaders/continuing members in your group to repeat the campaign, it may be for the best and they may know something that you do not.

On the other hand, if your group decides to repeat the campaign there are several things to consider. Perhaps you timed your campaign to peak too early and should have waited for March or April to pull off your largest action. Or it is likely that you will need to build a larger coalition to bring in more people to support you and then to mobilize these people in a mass extremely low risk action like a traditional rally, and also to engage in higher-risk forms of activity like a sit-in. Your strategy may have failed because you failed to organize enough people (a question of "width") or because you failed to get them involved enough (a question of "depth"). To solve the width issue you might need a systematic education campaign that could mean doing presentations to as many classes as possible (Indiana University No Sweat did presentations to thousands of students before they met with their administration), canvassing the dorms to talk to people individually, holding meetings in each dorm or on each floor of each dorm (students at Macalester did this for their anti-sweatshop campaign). To solve the depth issue you might want to create a direct action planning group to organize a sit-in or other dramatic action at the peak of the student power cycle. Even just leaking the threat of such an event may be enough to push your target to agree to your demands (For instance by collecting a list of students who would be willing to engage in a sit-in). During the anti-sweatshop movement due to the large number of sit-ins at other schools, administrators knew that if they did not cooperate with student activists at their school that their student activists might do a sit-in.

### **The Student Power Cycle**

The ability of student activists to mobilize supporters varies throughout the student year due to turnover, academic pressure, holidays, weather, student enthusiasm and other factors. The cycle that follows is designed for colleges using a semester system.

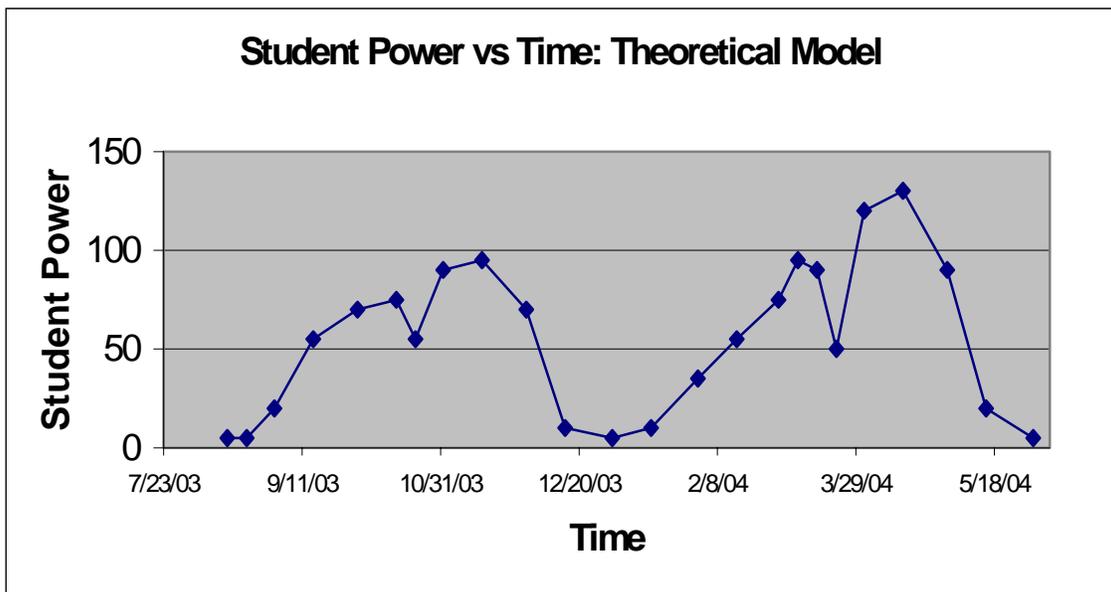
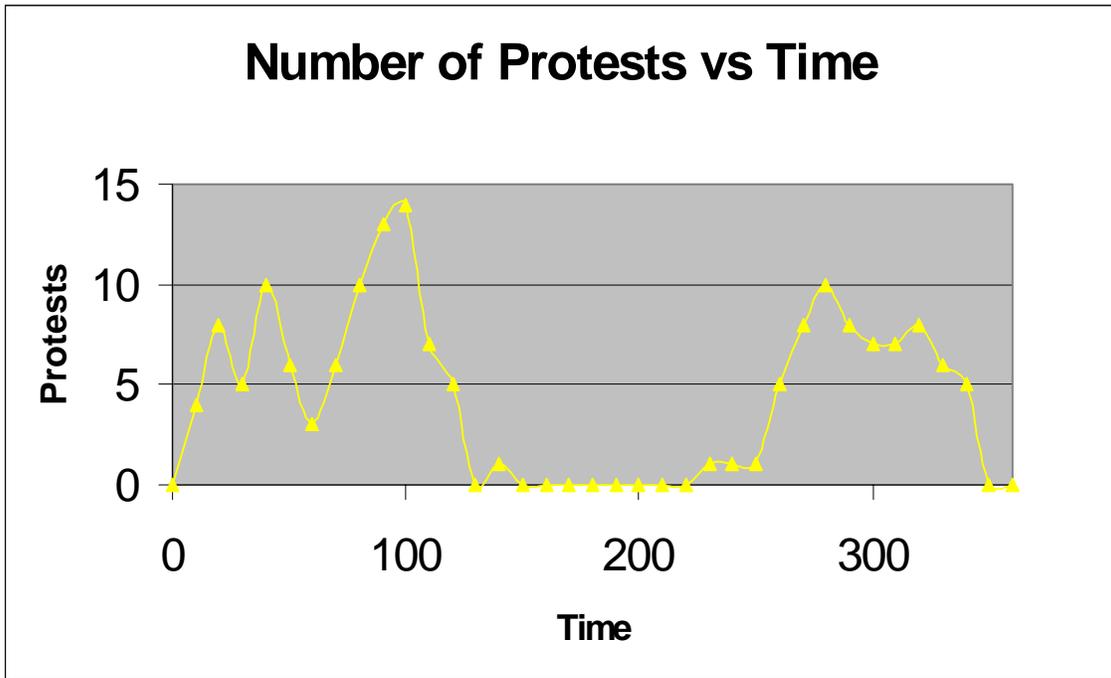
At the beginning of the year student power is very low, because of the long summer break and because of the loss of students who have graduated, dropped-out, gone abroad, or changed their personal priorities. However, students are in a good mood and ready to join new activities or to reinvigorate their involvement in past ones. Thus this is an excellent time to start a new group, launch a new campaign, or reinvigorate an old one. Student power will quickly build due to enthusiasm and good weather reaching a peak right before mid-term exams. It will decline during exams and afterwards during the fall break. However after this, student power will swiftly recover and reach a peak that is as high or greater than the first fall peak. A week or so before final exams, student power will sharply decline and remain at negligible levels over winter break.

In the winter (or spring) semester, student power will not recover as quickly as during the fall because of the cold weather which discourages outdoor activism and the lesser enthusiasm of the returning students whose winter vacation was shorter than that of the summer. However, as student activists have been educating, agitating, and recruiting for several months, as the semester progresses and the weather improves, student power will hit a strong peak before midterm exams. It will decline sharply during spring break, but return to achieve its highest potential of the entire school year. If you want to maximize your chance of success, you should plan to have your largest mobilizations during this peak in March or April. Finally, student power will decline as final exams and summer approach.

This is a general approximation of how student power changes over time. Other holidays (such as Thanksgiving and Easter) may have a significant negative impact. Also sports games or school-specific events (like a Parents or Siblings weekend) can also hurt. Student are affected differently by this cycle, for instance graduate students who do not have course work may still be able to work very hard at the end of the semester.

Note that the peak for student power also coincides with administrator power. Though administration power does not fluctuate as much because of greatly reduced rates of personnel turnover, lesser importance of the summer break, and strong institutions and traditions that maintain the power.

I searched online newspapers at several schools for a couple years and measured how many protests they had every ten days. The results of that are in "The Number of Protests vs Time". In addition, I developed a theoretical model where I estimated how much power students would have over time. I believe that the peaks and troughs in the theoretical model should be more pronounced because the date of many student protests are partially determined by external events. Thus in practice, students are compelled by external circumstances (for instance Bush declaring his intention to attack Iraq) to protest at times (like January 2003 in the snow) when potential student power is not at its maximum. If you assume that perhaps the timing of half of the protests were partially determined by external circumstances, the remaining protests are even more concentrated at the peaks of activity in Oct/Nov and Mar/April.



### **Conclusions for Activists Planning Timelines**

If you can control the timeline (often timelines are determined or partially determined by external factors like an administration's actions), it makes sense to structure a campaign so that the final peak of your movement is in March/April. That is when you demonstrate your support and have your final showdown with your administration. It makes sense that you do not want to put all your energy into winning in January or February, if it reduces your chance of success and if it means that you could be stuck with a couple months at the end of the school year during which you will not have enough time to restructure and redo your campaign or to start another one. You do not want to start a campaign only to lose most of its momentum over the summer break.

In the case of a very hard campaign, you might want to find a secondary goal that will put you on the path to your real goal and to try and achieve this secondary goal in March/April. Or if the campaign is not so hard, you might strive for your secondary goal in October or November, and the real win in March/April. If the campaign is easy, you could try to win it all in one semester. I'm not recommending that you must structure your timeline to perfectly fit this energy cycle, but rather that you keep it in mind and use it when it could help you.