

# Structuring a Functional and Just Student Activist/Organizing Organization



STUDENT ENVIRONMENTAL ACTION COALITION

While there are endless variations, there are three main components to good activist/organizing organizations: EDUCATION, ACTION, and CAMPAIGN. These are sometimes represented by committees or working groups, and often exist informally. Structuring a group is worthwhile because it creates accountability, stability, and direction, and eliminates the tyranny of structurelessness.<sup>1</sup>



## Education

Most groups work on education, both internal (educating members) and external (educating peers), and rightly so. This is a critical committee – it introduces new ideas, performs research, informs group members, and interacts with the constituency through posters, speakers, etc. However, education also needs action and campaign committees to be effective – education by itself does not make for social change, its success is difficult to measure, and it often fails to pressure or even reach the people who are making the real decisions. At what point is an education effort *successful*? How many posters do we put up until people are informed (and will act accordingly)?

## Action

There are many problems in this world, and we are trying to help solve them. However, we are up against significant and well organized structures (like racism and corporate power), so in order to make lasting changes we have to take collective action to get what we want. An action is something that wins concrete improvements in people's lives, makes people aware of their own power, and alters the relations of power between people, the government, and other institutions by building strong permanent local, state, and national organizations. A simple education effort about your school's irresponsible food purchasing policy is not going to change that policy – you have to act! The possibilities are endless: start a community garden, do a petition drive, go on a hunger strike, etc. However, taking action outside of a long-term strategic focus is often unaccountable and generally ineffective; good actions take place within the framework of a campaign.

## Campaign

This is something of a central committee, which delegates tasks and drives an organization's focus, though the goals are set collectively by everyone. A campaign is just a strategic vehicle to get what you want – it is a series of activities (tactics) designed to achieve your goals. A campaign working group moves things forward and does maintenance work – they do things like media and PR, campaign planning and assessment, outreach and recruitment, fundraising, etc. Campaigns accomplish much of the organizing work of an organization, and is thus critical in building collective power towards common goals. A campaign working group could very well encompass the goals of Education and Action.

## Democracy and Consensus

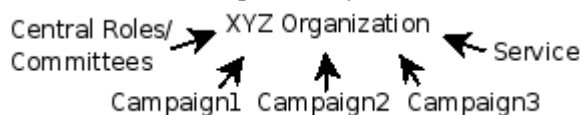
To build a world worth fighting for, we have to start from the ground up; part of the point of getting together to achieve common goals is to build democracy and social capital (“the product is the process”). The Principles of Democratic Structuring<sup>1</sup> include delegation, responsibility, distribution of authority, rotation of tasks, allocation of tasks along rational criteria, diffusion of information to everyone, and equal access to resources.

A group's decision-making process is a critical part of its structure and has the ability to encourage or hinder democratic engagement and development. Many groups practice majority rule and/or hierarchical decision-making, but this tends to be oppressive since it can let vocal people dominate and cause a large minority to feel voiceless and unneeded – you may have heard the phrase “you cannot use the master's tools to destroy the master's house.”<sup>2</sup> Consensus decision-making is where each member of a group agrees to the decision of a whole group. When practiced well, consensus is the most powerful and democratic decision-making process, and can also be the most efficient though it may seem to take longer, since it's the best way to develop an outcome that everyone is excited about. See [www.seac.org/resources](http://www.seac.org/resources) for more information on consensus.

## Configurations

It is possible and often preferable to run multiple campaigns at a time, to have multiple roles contained within each working group, etc. Different groups have experienced varying levels of success with varying configurations, and it's important to work with your group to find out what will be best for you.

Here's my preferred configuration for student organizing organizations, which I've personally used with success:



## Leadership and Roles<sup>3</sup>

Diffuse engagement makes strong, sustainable groups, and develops greater commitment and leadership in the movement. There are countless roles a group can have – try to have a role for everyone who's regularly involved, and a couple of unfilled roles for new people. These should rotate every semester/year, with people overlapping/transitioning for ½ as long as the role's duration:

**Campaign Coordinator(s)** - Oversee campaign activities, develop leadership; ideally, they have very little special tasks beyond plugging people in because everyone will know what to do (and will do it!)

**Committee Coordinator(s)** - Any committee can benefit from a coordinator

**Treasurer/Fundraising Coordinator** - Keep track of the books; submit timely budget requests(!), solicit budget needs and plan appropriately

**Secretary** - Maintain office space, pick up mail, etc.

**Administrative Liaison** - Often called “President” this person is a contact for the school and attends required meetings (can fall underneath the Secretary role)

**Historian** - An important role! – take pictures, gather written reflections, store news clips, campaign materials/summaries, etc. (can fit into Secretary role)

**Materials Specialist** - Someone who's savvy at design and can be on call for requests

**Recruitment/Leadership Development Coordinator** Engages your base and provide ways to connect and get involved; the deliberate use of group activities to increase membership/leadership. Personal calls/emails to anyone on a sign-up sheet, petition, etc.; work with Action Coordinator, Campaign Coordinators, etc. to engage folks in new and increasingly significant ways.

**Media/PR Coordinator** – Preferably experienced, this person elevates and capitalizes on group activities and develops lasting relationships with strategic media contacts

**Spokesperson** - Someone who is trained in media talking points, and communicates regularly with other coordinators (can fall under Media/Publicity)

**Partnerships and Alliances Coordinator** - A critical role, this person engages other organizations in deliberate and consistent dialogue. Alliances strategically connect a group to their campaign target(s), and ensure that everyone involved has the information they need, and know how, why, and when to support each other. On some campuses there are entire organizations devoted to this task.

**Action Coordinator** - An action a day... Meetings are fun, but direct action gets the goods!

**Fun & Entertainment Coordinator** - Keep vibes up, stress low, and friendships strong

**Food Coordinator** – Food at meetings & events = awesome

**Service Coordinator** - Service shouldn't be prioritized above organizing, but this gets folks moving & connects them with other folks

**Education Coordinator** - Internal and external – get a new person to present for 10 minutes at each meeting, coordinate teach-ins, etc.

**Trainings/Caucuses/Retreats Coordinator** - Good goals are 2 trainings/year, 1 caucus/year, 1 retreat/year; and don't forget to open up some of these opportunities to other groups!

**National/Regional Representative(s)** - Is your group a member of a larger organization or coalition?

**Email and Web Coordinator(s)** - Manage “Discuss” and “Announce” listservs, solicit regular web content; when functional, group websites can be the #1 recruitment tool

*ROTATING ROLES – these roles rotate every meeting:*

**Facilitator** - A central and important role – consult SEAC's “Guide to Running Fun and Effective Meetings” at SEAC.org/resources

**Notetaker** - Record meetings and send them to the listserv

**Scribe** - A small task - write things visibly up on a board, like during a brainstorm

**Vibes Watcher** - Like the Fun & Entertainment Coordinator, but during meetings; keeps morale high and attention focused

**Timekeeper (“Efficiency Goon”)** - Keep the group to agreed time limits for each agenda item

**Reminder-er** - Between meetings, remind people who picked up tasks to get them done; make sure they have everything they need

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1. “The Tyranny of Structurelessness” by Jo Freeman, originally published in 1970 <http://struggle.ws/pdfs/tyranny.pdf>

2. “The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House” from Audre Lorde's *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (1984)

3. For more information on Leadership, please see “Group Building & Student Organizing Basics” at SEAC.org/resources

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Author's Note: It is certainly possible to “over-structure” a group. I put this resource together because I think a ton of groups could benefit from it, but every situation is different (and constantly changing) and there is no perfect formula. Just store this 2-pager somewhere in your brainosphere (and your notebook), stay committed to accountability and democracy, and you're on your way to being a productive leader of a winning group.