

Student Environmental Action Coalition



Guide to Starting or Reviving a Group

There is no simple answer to the question "How do I start a new group?" or "How do I revive a group that is faltering?" This guide is designed to help you organize a student group at your school or to revive a dead or failing group. It is neither conclusive nor perfect and much more could be said on the subject. For a more extensive guide to organizing check out the SEAC Organizing Guide or the High School Organizing Guide.

Organizing is the most important way that we as environmentalists are ultimately going to create positive change. All other progressive movements in the past have made changes in our society by organizing: the labor movement, the civil rights movement, the antiwar movement, etc. Like these movements, we can be many times more powerful together than we are as individuals.

So what is organizing? The Midwest Academy says that organizing is "overwhelmingly about personal relationships. It is about changing the world and changing how individuals act together. The relationships organizers develop are their most important resource and forming relationships their most important talent." We like this definition, so let's start from there...

Knowing Your School and Community

The first step is to become familiar with your community. Organizing should be rooted in a place, and our work should be primarily about defending the places, people, and other living things that we love. As such, there are a number of initial questions you want to answer:

- What are the major environmental and social problems in your school or community?
- What other activist groups exist on campus or in your community? (get to know them, and their leadership)
- Is there important work that needs to be done in your community, but is not already happening; work that you think others would be willing to join you in?
- What support can the already-existing groups give to this work, or will your work give to them?
- How do other groups organize?
- Who are the campus and community leaders?
- How do you "officially" register a new group on your campus?
- Is there money for campus groups?
- How do you get access to these funds?
- Do you need a faculty sponsor?
- How do you reserve rooms to meet?
- Where do people gather?

Often there is a campus activities office, or student government offices, which will help you answer some of these questions, but don't get bogged down in the bureaucracy. You will be learning about your school all year, so don't let a lack of information about official campus policy stop you from organizing the group.

Initial Planning

You may want to get a small group of people together to help you plan a kick-off meeting. Use word of mouth and small-scale advertising to find out who might be interested in helping.

It is important not to let this planning group become a "clique." Also, be sure not to set any policies or positions in stone until a larger group can vote on it. It may become very difficult to get other people to join and be active in your group if they sense a lack of democracy and feel as though everything has already been decided upon.

Outreach

Outreach is one of the most basic tasks in organizing. You should always be trying to bring new people into the group. Also keep in mind that how and where you reach out to people will determine the kind of group you will create. If you only talk to white students, or if all of the people in the planning group are men, the perspective of your group will be limited and the work that you do will reflect this. But seeking diversity in your organizing work should not just be about "recruiting" whatever demographic you feel is missing from your group. Remember that organizing is about building relationships, and if all the relationships that you are involved in are with people who look and think like yourself, maybe that is a good place to start making some changes.

Below is a simple plan for general outreach:

1. Answer the question: Why would someone want to join this group? (It may be different for different people, but the answer should be a part of all the outreach you do.)
2. General Publicity: You want to broadcast far and wide that a group is forming or reforming. There is a plethora of different ways to do general publicity. Publicity efforts can include: e-mails to individuals and listservs, posters, making announcements in your classes, leaflets, table tents (folded leaflets on cafeteria tables), chalking the sidewalk or blackboards, banners, ads or articles in the campus newspaper, public service announcements on the campus radio or television station, notice in a daily bulletin, bathroom graffiti, skywriting, ESP, blaring your message out over a bullhorn at lunch, etc. You may want to set up a table in the student union, cafeteria or other places where people gather. Have pens and paper out for people to sign up with their contact information. [Hint: put your name on the list - no one likes to be "first."] In general, the more people hear about your group, the more likely they are to get involved, so try lots of different strategies for publicity. Remember to put the time and place of your kick-off meeting on everything, as well as contact information in case people have further questions.
3. Lists: Develop a list of interested people. Only a fraction of the list will probably be active members, but it's good to keep as many people informed about your work as possible. Get in one-on-one contact with the people on your list to remind them about the kick-off meeting and learn about why they are interested in the issues. Personal contact is almost always the most effective means of outreach, but if you don't have lots of time, a small reminder via email or on someone's answering machine is better than nothing.

Kick-Off Meeting

A kick-off meeting or event is a good way to get many of the contacts that you have been gathering directly involved and talking to one another. It should only take a few weeks to organize. The goal of the kick-off meeting is to get people interested in the group that you are forming or the work that you will be doing. Your event should be fun, informative, and participatory.

The first step is to take care of logistics. Pick a time when the most people are able to come. Don't panic though--there is no perfect time when everyone is going to be available. Try to pick a time that can stay the same each week. Set a goal for how many people you want at your meeting (be ambitious), then reserve a room that you think will be a little too small. When you pack a room it creates an incredible sense of excitement, and there is nothing uglier than lots of empty chairs at a kick-off meeting.

If possible, get food for your meeting. That will keep everyone in a good mood and willing to stick around for awhile. Another crowd-pleaser is to start and end roughly on time. You want to assure people that the group is going to be a good use of their time.

During this first meeting, and if the size of the group permits, it's important for everyone to give introductions. Go around the room and get people's names and favorite food, or some other sort of icebreaker. Immediate, friendly introductions are very important - if people feel uncomfortable they won't come back. It's a good idea to start all meetings by having people go around the circle and introduce themselves or just "check-in" with how they are feeling.

One of the planners should give a brief introduction to the group. New groups need to emphasize that a group is what people make of it. If planners have some ideas, they should be presented, but as suggestions, not declarations. This should take only a few minutes of the overall meeting. It's also a good idea to include an educational component in your meetings and events. Many people who are attending for the first time won't know very much about the particular issues that you are working on, or see an immediate reason why they should get involved. Don't be afraid to tell people the truth about what's going on, even if the truth is that our planet is being destroyed, its people are being oppressed, and our democracy is being plundered. But also keep in mind that people want to be inspired and to feel a sense of hope. And there's almost always as much reason to feel hopeful and inspired as there is to feel angry and depressed.

It might be a good idea to have a simple action planned that can involve everyone. It might be a quick poster-making or letter-writing activity. Whatever it is, have it prepared before the meeting. This will excite people, as most groups don't start taking action at their very first meeting. Mark yourselves from the beginning as a group that doesn't just sit around and talk.

It's then worthwhile to ask people to brainstorm about how they feel and what they want to accomplish with the group. You might go around in a circle or break into smaller groups to make sure everyone gets an opportunity to speak. Try to keep the discussion focused without stifling anyone's creativity - group decisions tend to be the most productive, and ideas that seem strange at first can end up being visionary. It is vitally important that as many people as possible be involved in the decision-making process, and that they have a personal stake in the group. If people feel like they are taking orders or being ignored, they will tune out and never come back. Above all, make things fun and informal—just because we're activists doesn't mean we have to be grim.

At the end of the meeting agree on the time for the next meeting. The meeting time should be a proposal ("same time next week?") and decision, not a long discussion. Don't simply ask, "When should we meet next?" It will take all night to decide. If you plan to be active and inclusive, regular meeting times are best. For less active groups, sporadic meetings can be sufficient.

You might also want to give people until the next meeting to start thinking about your group's official name. You're welcome to use "SEAC" of course, or come up with one of your own. Finally, make sure that everyone's assignment for the next meeting is to do some personal recruitment. Do the math: if every person that shows up for your first meeting brings a friend to the second meeting, you'll be twice as large!

It's a nice idea to have the people who have been at the planning meetings hang around afterwards to talk to folks, develop relationships, and answer any questions. This also gives you an opportunity to critique the meeting so that you can do better next time, and leaves a space for anyone else to stick around who'd like to be more involved in the leadership of your group. Make sure to invite new people who are interested to be involved in the planning of the group.

A final note on your kick-off meeting or event: Don't be upset or feel as though you failed if a huge crowd doesn't turn out. It takes time to build a movement, and often people have to hear about things repeatedly and from many different sources before they take it seriously. Also, the number of people in attendance isn't nearly as important as the level of dedication and sincerity that those people possess. Remember the Margaret Mead quote about "small groups of committed citizens..."? We're sure there's no need to repeat it again here.

Equality and Justice

Remember that the strongest organization is an equitable one. Men especially tend to dominate in group settings. This happens because we have been socialized in a sexist society where men are taught to speak loudly, blurt out their ideas and opinions, restate other people's ideas as their own, and engage in many other largely unconscious destructive behaviors. So if you are a male, educate yourself about sexism, always be on the lookout for sexist behavior in yourself and other males in the group, and work to undo it whenever possible. Systemic sexism is one of the most destructive things that can erupt in a group. (Note: a male wrote this paragraph.)

Racism, classism, ageism, heterosexism, and other forms of discrimination should also be kept in mind in all that you do. Work to make sure that everyone knows they are invited to attend and ensure that they are given an opportunity to participate when they do. Overcoming racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression is a difficult task, but if we fail to do this within our movement and as individuals then how will we ever be able to stop the tide of environmental destruction?

Structure

At one of the first meetings of your group you should decide what the overall structure of the group is going to be. Obviously such decisions shouldn't be set in stone, but they should be stated clearly by the group so that everyone involved knows how things work. Some groups have a strong hierarchy; others have little or none. Most fall somewhere in between. There are advantages and disadvantages to each. Your group needs to decide for itself what will work best in your unique situation.

You must also determine whether specific positions or leadership roles within your organization will be a benefit or a detriment to your group. Decisions are generally made more quickly if a few people make them. However, these decisions are not usually as good or as appreciated by the organization as a whole when compared to those achieved by consensus. When there are few clearly defined roles within the group, there is the chance for greater discussion between equals. However, those who know the most or speak the loudest may dominate the group.

Two important roles at any meeting are facilitator and note-taker. The facilitator guides the flow of the meeting while the note-taker, curiously enough, takes notes. You may want to make these rotating positions. Other important positions within your group are treasurer and contact person (aka "President"). Many schools require these positions. These jobs should be changed less often because they tend to work better with some degree of continuity.

Some other possible positions include vibes-watcher (to make sure people are not getting too stressed at your meetings or that a few people aren't dominating the group), co-chairs, secretary, newsletter editor, historian, project coordinators, and liaison with other groups (like your SEAC National Council Reps!). You might also want or be required to have a faculty sponsor. Make sure you pick your faculty sponsor wisely, and choose someone who meets your needs. There is a problem if your sponsor is speaking too frequently in the meetings, telling people what to do, or is the sole source of information for the group. The sponsor should be a resource, not a leader. The membership should have control over the group's agenda.

At meetings, you may also want to have an agenda-maker--likely the facilitator. You may want to have committees which work on specific projects or campaigns. Some groups have one meeting a week and begin with 15-20 minutes of announcements, presentations, and group decision-making. Then they break down into committees for 45 minutes of nitty-gritty work and come back together to close the meeting. By having the committee meetings at the same time as the regular meetings the group retains some cohesion and gives everyone an easy "in" to a committee. However, this also limits people to one committee. You may want to have each committee set up their own, separate meeting time. Other groups choose to work on one or two campaigns at a time as one larger group. Again, this is something that you'll want to decide as a group.

Planning Your First Campaign

After your first meeting, continue to publicize. At the next one you will have some new folks and an agenda which you have agreed upon since your previous meeting. Once the group has gotten rolling it's time to figure out what to do, and how to do it. This section could be a book in and of itself (such as the SEAC Organizing Guide) but we can touch on a few main points here. The project that the group decides to work on is called a campaign. Your group should come up with as specific a goal as it can, for example getting your campus to stop using pesticides on the grass. Vague goals like "raising the awareness of people on campus about the environment" aren't very useful because your group will not really be able to measure its progress and won't have anything concrete to point to that it has succeeded in doing. Also, keep in mind that the issues you choose to tackle will dictate, in part, who participates in your group. A diverse range of issues leads to a more diverse group.

You also should develop a timeframe to reach your goal. Plan out your overall strategy with an understanding of whom you specifically need to target to achieve your goal, and an understanding of who is on your side and with whom you can work in order to win your campaign. Also think about what the potential campaign will mean for your organization: the demands it will make and resources it will require, and also the benefits it will return. An active and visible project helps ensure the vitality of the group by continually attracting new people who have read or heard about your work.

Often groups start out working on an issue such as starting a campus recycling program, getting disposables off campus, getting reusable mugs accepted by the food services for coffee and other drinks, or pushing the school to use energy-efficient lighting. SEAC's book Campus Ecology is a useful guide to figuring out what problems exist and how to tackle them.

The next step--surprise--is to implement your plan. As you choose what to work on there are some things to keep in mind. The group should begin by developing specific tactics, which will fit in with the overall strategy. Examples of tactics include: writing letters to the administration, lobbying elected representatives, setting up information tables, gathering petition signatures, writing opinion pieces for the campus paper, holding a demonstration, hanging a banner from a building, occupying the president's office--whatever you think will work the best. The best way to do this is to have the group brainstorm as many ideas as possible without being critical of any of them. Then go over the whole list and discuss them and single out the ones you want to use. Generally, your tactics will start out simple and "within the system," but

as the campaign goes on, you should steadily escalate the tactics you use until you achieve your goal.

Try to avoid "volunteerism" as your sole tactic. This means that you should think in terms of working toward changes in policies and structures of your school and the larger society, instead of simply trying to clean up everything yourself. If you find that the group is meeting each week to decide who is going to pick up the cans in the cafeteria, there is a problem. You can often be a lot more effective if you instead spend your time organizing for a program that the administration funds and hires people to run. Starting the program on your own might be an effective short-term tactic to show the administration that it can be done, but the community as a whole is ultimately responsible for dealing with its impact on the local environment.

Also try a mixture of activities. If all the group does is "raise awareness" it will become very disappointing when nothing actually changes. If the group jumps from one big event to another without really winning any concrete changes, the group will dwindle to the diehards. If there are no big events at all, people will forget about the group. Once you know what you're aiming for, it is essential to get as many of your group members as possible directly involved. Generate a list of tasks necessary for the campaign and let interested people volunteer to do them.

As your campaign progresses, you should have frequent discussions about whether what you are doing is working or not, and change your tactics if necessary. Each time you meet, allow everyone who wants to help take up new tasks to do as part of the campaign. If you choose a realistic goal, effective tactics, and are well organized, you stand a good chance of winning your campaign on the timeline you set. You will have achieved a concrete positive change in our society. Congratulations are in order!

At first, your group will probably only be able to take on one major campaign. If your group grows and develops, later on you may be able to form working groups to take on two or more campaigns at once. If you try this at first, however, you will probably find that you are spread too thin and can't get anything accomplished. Try to keep focused.

Remember: always think like an organizer, rather than just an activist. This means that you should always think in terms of forming relationships with others, and not just doing all the work yourself. By spending your time organizing ten other people to work on something, you can make ten times as much happen as you can just working on your own. Besides, it's much more enjoyable that way.

"And We Brought Our Friends"

Working with other groups is a key part of organizing because it increases our power and helps us to recognize connections between our individual issues. On your campus alone there are likely a lot of groups that could potentially be part of a coalition to work on environmental issues, and there are undoubtedly coalitions on campus working on other issues that the environmental group could contribute to. Work with people of color groups on environmental racism issues or with human rights organizations on the destruction of rainforests and the indigenous peoples in them, for example. As you begin to form relationships with other communities--minorities, labor, and other groups that would probably appreciate your solidarity--you will find that most issues are interrelated and that environmental problems are invariably linked to social justice issues.

In addition to campus coalitions, SEAC provides an avenue to network with other student environmental groups and tackle issues which go beyond your own campus. Regional or state coordinating is a very important part of SEAC's overall structure and organizing model. This type of organizing can be done by either one person or (more realistically) it can be a group of people who take on the task. So get in touch with your local SEAC coordinators, and the national SEAC office, and find out how your group can collaborate with local, regional, and national networks of young people who share your concerns.

Write to or call your fellow SEACers. People can provide a lot of organizing ideas and resources, and by talking and networking with other groups we all become stronger. Your group can join one of SEAC's national campaigns or any of a number of other campaigns. Also, try to get your group members on SEACnet, an email network through which we can all communicate with one another to plan conferences and campaigns, share information or skills, and build community. You can sign up on SEAC's web page at: www.seac.org/seacnet.html. Call the National Office if you are interested in any of these things, or if you just have questions and concerns that we might be able to help with.

SEAC National

So who is this mysterious “SEAC National” that we keep referring to? What does SEAC National do? Well the simplest answer is “you.” You and your group make up SEAC National, as well as other environmental and social justice groups around the nation. Anyone can be involved in SEAC, as long as they have environmental and social justice as their goals. What we mean by this is that SEAC National is simply a network of student and youth groups from all across the country. This network is only as strong as the groups involved, and it depends on volunteers, coordinators and cool SEACers like you to make it whatever you want it to be!

SEAC is structured to ensure democracy within the network. The decision-making body within SEAC is the National Council (NC). The National Council is made up of representatives from grassroots SEAC groups. That means your group can be a part of the NC and therefore create, strengthen and build this national student movement for justice! Vote on an NC representative today! (We have much more info on being an NC rep., just contact us if you don't already have it.)

The work within SEAC is done by Working Committees (WC). These committees are numerous and the only way they work is through volunteers from the grassroots groups who are involved in the WCs. Anyone can start helping out by working with the WCs. Then there is the National Office, located in Philadelphia, PA. The office acts as a central clearinghouse for all the student and youth groups. The mostly-volunteer staff there fields tons of info requests and phone calls, and keeps the network communicating and organized. The office fundraises, puts together *Threshold*--SEAC's movement magazine, plans the Summer Training Institute, helps regional coordinators coordinate, and helps grassroots groups with their campaigns and planning their conferences and anything else you can imagine. BUT the National office is not the organization; this is the most mistaken fact about SEAC. We are the only student and youth run and led national environmental organization. This means that while there are usually a few people working in the office to help build and assist the grassroots in their endeavors, the office staff also needs some help from you in order to do this effectively.

Things you can send to the office in order to help build our network:

- Your group and group members' regularly-updated contact information
- All your news clippings, press releases, fliers, fact sheets, photos etc.
- Updates about the campaigns your groups are working on
- Volunteers, work-studies, and interns (see if people are interested in hanging out at the office over the summer, or even during the school year if they have internship credits they need or would like to fulfill)
- Yearly membership dues! (This is a big one – most of all the funding SEAC gets is from memberships and donations)

Moving Forward

As your group continues its work, it will begin to develop in a number of ways. In the long term, you will hopefully find that your understanding of the nature of the environmental crisis will deepen. You will begin to deal with deeper issues, such as how the structure of our economic system is often responsible for much of the environmental destruction that occurs in the world; and why corporations and our

government can continue destroying the world without being held accountable to anyone except themselves. You will probably also find your group focusing less exclusively on changes in personal practice (though these remain important!) and thinking more towards social change.

You might also come of the opinion that the limited reforms towards which we are working are not simply ends in themselves. If we are truly to save the planet and its inhabitants, we should see the issue-based campaigns we are working on and the groups we are organizing as part of an overall program to get at the roots of what is wrong with our society, and to change in a fundamental way the power relations that permit injustices to continue. This is the way that many people progress who stay involved in the movement for any length of time, and chances are that you will do the same. A healthy exercise is to regularly ask yourself or your group where you think the work that you do fits in to the overall scheme of things. Are you cultivating solidarity with other oppressed peoples? Are you thinking long-term with regards to your strategies and campaigns? Are you keeping abreast of what your fellow activists are doing, as well as your opposition? And are you paying enough attention to the means that you employ in your organizing, instead of just the ends?

A last puzzle that we'll leave you with--one that has plagued student and youth groups more than perhaps any other--how are you building a sense of continuity in the work that you are doing and the organizations that you're building? One of the most successful tactics that people in power employ is to simply stall when demands for change are made. College administrators look forward to the day when a particular rabble-rouser on campus will graduate. Policy makers count on the proposition that people have a short attention span and will eventually lose interest in a particular issue. Prove them wrong. Make it a point to mentor the younger students in your group. Make sure they have a solid foundation of the history of your group--the campaigns you've worked on, the tactics you've tried and outreach strategies you've used that have been successful. Teach them what you've learned about writing press releases, and fundraising, and who the professors on your campus are that you can count on for support. There's no reason why student/youth groups should have to reinvent the wheel every four years.

Also, on a personal level, try to discern what you think your place is in the movement, and what you need to do on a personal level to be sure that you can be involved in this struggle for the long haul. Injustice isn't going anywhere anytime soon. If we learn how to be “long-distance runners” however, if we find a way to stay involved in this movement as a core commitment in our lives, then there's amazing potential for passing on a world worth having to our children and grandchildren.

Finally, keep in mind that in all of the organizing you do, you are building relationships, building community. Issues and campaigns and groups come and go, but there's little more comforting in this life than feeling as though you are one small part of a massive movement towards justice and sustainability in this world. Share meals and stories and hugs with the people in your community, in addition to political victories. The forces in our society that advocate violence and greed try to atomize us; we overcome those forces when we cultivate unity and solidarity.

So hey, good luck! If you have more questions, or want to order the SEAC Organizing Guide or some other fact sheets: contact the SEAC National Office, P.O. Box 31909, Philadelphia, PA 19104. Call 215-222-4711 or visit our website at <http://www.seac.org> Personal visits are also highly encouraged!

Disclaimer: This document, as with all SEAC documents, is a work-in-progress. Have you had experiences in your campus/community organizing that contradict or compliment what you've read here? If so, let us know! We're always looking to update our materials, and are always looking for new perspectives and insights from the people who know best--those of you at the grassroots. Keep in touch...

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