

Getting Things Done: Effective Events & Campaigns Organising

CANADIAN FEDERATION OF STUDENTS

GETTING THINGS DONE: EFFECTIVE ORGANISING

Influencing Decision-Makers

Strength in numbers

No campus student organisation, local labour union or community group, no matter how big or active, has the resources or political clout on their own to effectively influence the post-secondary education or other public policies of the provincial and federal governments. At best, an local union or group could have an impact on a few electoral ridings. Governments ignore groups that pose no political threat to them. It's much more cost effective for a large number of students' unions, labour unions or community groups to pool their resources and to work in partnership than for each to undertake this work on their own.

Strategic Approach to Achieving Goals

For a student organisation, labour union or community group to be successful at influencing government policy, it must produce quality research, develop relationships with decision-makers, work in coalition with like-minded groups and demonstrate that there is public support for its issues.

Accurate research

Thorough, accurate and in-depth research is required to justify any proposal put to government. For example, the Canadian Federation of Students employs full-time researchers across Canada who study and prepare analyses of government policies and trends within post-secondary education, and develop alternatives to government policy. This kind of research, whether undertaken paid staff or dedicated volunteers is instrumental in building the credibility of a campaign position on a particular issue.

Lobbying Decision-Makers

As a student organisation, the primary purpose of the Federation is to represent students' issues and concerns to government and other decision-makers. This is similar to other groups in other sectors. Regular contact with elected and non-elected officials and bureaucrats is how the message of student organisations, labour unions or community groups is conveyed to government. Over the years, the Federation has become a strong presence on Parliament Hill, in provincial legislatures and in campus boards of governors across Canada. It is important for a group's spokespersons to meet regularly with elected and non-elected government and administration representatives, and frequently make presentations to official committees and task forces. The Federation, for example, meets regularly with federal MPs, other government officials and representatives from all political parties in Ottawa and at the provincial level.

Membership mobilization

Of course, regular meetings with government and all the research in the world will have little impact unless the government believes a message has widespread support. Student organisations, labour unions or community groups must seek active and demonstrable support of their members through activities ranging from petition drives to mass mobilisations. These campaigns raise public awareness of the issues, which correspondingly affects the decisions and policies of government.

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Planning a Campaign: Getting Started

This is a guide to provide you with helpful hints on organising. Feel free to expand on these ideas and adapt them to your student organisation, local labour union, community group or community in general.

The Committee

Call it a Campaigns Committee, an Educational Issues Committee or whatever fits best; a permanent and active committee will be your most essential tool in organising. The committee can be put together from a group of volunteers: involve your friends and board members, put an announcement in the campus paper to let as many students know about organising efforts, contact clubs and other community groups, put up notices on bulletin boards, set up an information table in well-traveled areas and use sign up sheets to keep track of those who say they'd like to be involved.

Getting people out to meetings

Decide on the goals and strategies of the campaign before you plan activities.

- What results do you want to achieve?
- Do you simply want your audience to become aware of the issues?
- Do you want the person who hears or reads the message to take an action such as writing a letter to your MP, making a phone call, or attending a meeting?

Access your resources

Explore all possible sources of in-kind contributions for your project. For example, can a union, club or community group donate free photocopying of your materials? Can a local labour union sponsor an advertisement in the campus or community paper? Be creative and remember, it never hurts to ask for help. Get other student or community groups who may be interested in the issue to help you.

Remember: if you can turn other students and community members into organisers, then your campaign will be much more effective. How can clubs and other groups shape or tailor the campaign to their specific interests?

Brainstorming

Brainstorming should be done both individually and collectively. One member of the group may pose the problem in a way which stimulates thought, and permits a wide range of responses. Another person should be responsible for jotting down all the ideas that are called out. For best results, brainstorming should be intensive. A time limit should be agreed upon in advance. When the session is over, the list of ideas should be copied and distributed for analysis and judgment. Selection of the best ideas can be done later.

Note:

- Everyone should suspend judgment until evaluation time.
- Creativity must be welcomed—it is far easier to tame an idea into a workable format than to think new ones up.
- Build on other ideas. This will contribute to a sense of 'synergism.'
- The more ideas the better—create an atmosphere for everyone to participate.

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Doing the work

Organising tasks must be decided on and divided up among the committee. Once people have taken on tasks, they should be responsible for reporting back to the committee.

Make sure that assignments are scheduled around the individuals who are keen to take responsibility for them. By scheduling tasks, you will get a sense of the time required to complete them.

It is important to share as much of the work as possible. If the same people are doing most of the tasks, there can be a sense, within the committee, that others are not required. Remember, all individuals must feel ownership over the campaign.

Essential tasks include:

- putting up posters
- distributing leaflets and canvassing students and other community members
- sitting at information tables
- speaking to classrooms and writing on class chalkboards
- compiling and calling through phone lists

Pacing the effort

Be careful to ensure the campaign is paced so that the committee does not exhaust itself before the campaign is underway. It should build at a steady pace, with each event contributing to a sense of momentum. What you do in the last week before your event can make or break the campaign. If you have been successful in building awareness of the issues, and involving large numbers of students in the preparation of the campaign, you should have a good turnout for the event.

Along the way, meet often to assess the work of the committee. By doing so, you will be able to see how you are relating to students and community members and how the goals of the campaigns are being met. What feedback are you getting? Are more individuals coming out to meetings?

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Logistics

It is never too early to ensure that physical, media, or other facilities will be available.

1. Ensure that regular meeting rooms are booked so that organising committee meetings can be well-publicised. Make sure that bookings for planned events are arranged well in advance. Ensure that facilities are accessible and be sure to note that on any materials you distribute.
2. Sound and film equipment might be needed, as well as someone assigned to operate it.
3. There may be local media, like magazines or weekly TV shows, that must plan content ahead of time. If you want media coverage, prepare media releases and updates regularly. Think about public service announcements on your campus or community radio station.
4. Don't forget how important letters to the student or campus newspaper are. You can highlight your events by organising regular submissions to your campus or community paper.
5. Contact speakers or resource people that you might want to have appear at an event well in advance. RECONFIRM with them as you get closer to the date of the event.
6. Check to see that your event does not conflict with other events.
7. See what other campuses and groups in other communities are doing and whether activities can be coordinated.
8. Contact faculty, support staff, community groups and other potential coalition partners to get them involved.

Getting things done

When we act as individuals, our actions may seem small and insignificant. When we act collectively, anything is possible. That is why “strength in numbers” has become such an important principle of the student, labour and social justice movements. Whether it is through “economies-of-scale” or “power politics,” all student and labour unions were founded on the principle that, whether it is for campaigns or services, individuals who work together can shape our lives, our education and our society.

Students, workers and community members get active for a variety of reasons. Some want improve their education, others want to change their world, and still others want to develop a community amongst their peers. Whether you are organising a political campaign or an awareness campaign, the principles of organising are similar: you need clarity, vision and proper planning.

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Tips for Successful Organising:

Stay away from the “A-word”

Apathy - Students, workers and other citizens can be pretty cynical, but most are not apathetic. Given the pressure that we are all under from classes, finances, child care, family and other commitments, it's important to find ways to allow students and workers to participate in campus and community life. It is the role of the organiser to motivate students on our campuses, workers in their workplaces and community members in their constituencies so that we can build a vibrant community life and achieve our campaign goals.

Try new ideas, but avoid gimmicks

If you have selected a campaign issue that is relevant to your audience, then most will have direct or indirect experience with it. Draw off of that experience. There is no need to trick people into getting involved - besides, it's risky. The best way to ruin good opportunities to bring people or media to an event is to over-hype and under-deliver. Stick to the basic, tried-and-true methods, be irreverent (we're passionate, after all), and use your imagination!

Give some context

Sometimes people can get demoralised if change does not occur immediately, after only one event or campaign. By giving students a sense of history and perspective, they will be less susceptible to becoming discouraged.

Be realistic

Most importantly, most people know when they are being “fed a line.” Avoid moralistic cheerleading. Students, workers and community members need accurate assessments of where the campaign is at and where it is going.

Bite off what you can chew

The best way to get people involved is success! Although there is no sure-fire formula for motivating people, you can promote involvement in an action by highlighting victories and giving people an opportunity to help shape the event or campaign.

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7 Steps to Organising Events:

1. Setting Goals

Public events are often the result of inspired brainstorming sessions, but when the dust settles, a difficult question must be asked: what are our goals for this event? You should set concrete goals for involvement (attendance) and intended impact. This will give direction to your planning and criteria for evaluating the event.

2. Planning

Now that you have an idea and a set of goals, you should define your event. Why are you doing it? Who is it for? Where is it? When is it?

3. Dividing Up Responsibilities

Make a list of everything that will need to be done and divide up responsibilities among members of the group. Tasks may include getting a rally permit, reserving rooms, and making food. Core members and leaders should be sure to delegate tasks, so that one small clique doesn't end up monopolising all the power and experience and burning themselves out. If possible, devise a system of back up people to cover for those who don't follow through with their responsibilities.

4. Logistics, Organising and Networking

Reserve rooms and get permits well in advance; make sure that speakers know what they will be speaking on; arrange transportation for participants; scout locations for accessibility. Ask other organisations on your campus and in your community to endorse the event or help to organise it. This will broaden support for your action and broaden its impact.

5. Outreach/Publicity

Effective publicity is essential to the success of any event or campaign. Since the power that student, labour and community groups have relies on people, getting the word out is one of the most important things you will do. It requires a well thought-out strategy and plan.

Use the following principles: VISIBILITY, SIMPLICITY, CLEAR LANGUAGE, POSITIVITY, CREATIVITY, REPETITION, REPUTATION, PRIDE and FOCUS.

6. Last Minute Preparation

What needs to be done on the day of the event? Make sure that a designated group of organisers know what they need to do: calling the media, microphone setup/cleanup, literature/donation/sign-up table, and food are some things to consider.

7. Evaluation

This step is sometimes skipped because of exhaustion, but it is important for the core organisers to sit down and engage in constructive self-criticism: What did we do right? What could we do better? This will build the cohesiveness of your group and allow you to improve your public events over time. It also useful to write up some of these ideas immediately afterwards, while they are fresh in your head so that you may reflect upon them the next time you start the organising process afresh.

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Volunteers - Tips for Recruiting

- ✓ If you make it sound exciting, people will be excited to be involved! Your energy and enthusiasm for the project will motivate others to participate.
- ✓ Promote the positive! Instead of stating what you need from volunteers, show potential volunteers what they will get back from being involved with your organisation.
- ✓ Clearly describe what student volunteers will do with your campaign. Provide potential volunteers with descriptions of what they will be doing; help students understand what their role will be.
- ✓ Volunteers need to feel wanted and valued by your organisation. If you recruit people to help on the campaign, but do not make them feel valued or needed, you will lose them.
- ✓ Diversify your efforts. Reach out and involve students from diverse constituencies and backgrounds.
- ✓ Avoid questioning people's motives for being involved in your campaign. If you question their motives too early, volunteers might feel less likely to return or be involved.
- ✓ Be honest about the time commitment involved and other challenges that volunteers might encounter. Realise that volunteers are students, workers or other community members who may be working, caring for a family, or dealing with other issues.
- ✓ When planning a campaign or event, make sure that it does not exclude certain groups or individuals from getting involved.
- ✓ Recognise the faults or perceptions that others might have of your organisation, and be willing to honestly address them.

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The Campaign Plan: Thinking it Through

Too often organisers, even the best ones, think in terms of tactics, not strategy. Tactics (a rally, a petition, a sit-in, etc.) should be tools that are determined by your overall strategy for influencing your target.

Planning is necessary if you want to avoid wasted activity, and make your collective efforts count. It should move from the general to the specific, from the big picture to the small, from the long term to the short, from “what” to “how.” Planning entails:

- Setting a goal
- Devising objectives or strategies to achieve the goal
- Devising actions to achieve the objectives

Goals or “Ends”

Develop a long-term vision of what you want to achieve, as well as short-term objectives that are quantifiable.

Generate ideas for objectives that will lead to your goal, and then decide which to pursue by asking:

- Does it have strong group support?
- Is it specific enough? (“Improve access” is too general. “Get government to fund a tuition fee reduction” is specific.)
- Is it attainable? Will it have an immediate visible impact?

Strategies or “Means to the End”

Once your group agrees on a goal or set of goals, ask yourselves how you might accomplish those goals. In all your planning, try to look beyond the obvious and be sure to keep your action plan flexible so you can respond to the unexpected.

Tactics

What you use to fulfill your action plan. They are nothing more than creative and effective ways to carry out the strategy. Tactics are those consciously deliberate acts by which we try to change the world around us.

Sometimes our tactics are educational, such as leafleting or holding forums, although they can simultaneously be directed at your target such as by putting contact information on the leaflet and identifying who has the power to change things.

Assessment

Hold a meeting or event for organisers and participants to debrief and gain closure. It is an opportunity to delegate post-event tasks and celebrate your hard work.

Evaluate the event by reviewing media coverage, participation, speakers, etc. and organising, such as facilitation, planning, and outreach. Examine the strengths and weaknesses and compile your experiences into a post-mortem to use as a reference for next time.

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EXERCISE

Issue

Write down a specific issue or concern for students, workers or community members on your campus or in your community.

Goals

If your students' organisation, labour union or community group were to undertake a campaign on this issue, what would be your goals?

Strategy

Write down the strategies you would use to reach the stated goals.

Tactics

Write down the tactics you would use to implement the stated strategy.

Assessment

Write down how you would evaluate the success of the campaign.
