



Student organizers face a lot of unique challenges. Schools have a lot of power over students day to day life and impose complex rules and procedures around decision making. Typically they aren't required to consult students for these decisions either. Meanwhile, students are still learning how to organize groups, and often don't get enough guidance when doing so.

Yet school activism and community building, especially college campuses, has a long history in the broader fight for a better world.

## **STARTING A NEW GROUP**

### **IDENTIFY YOUR CAUSE**

Before diving into organizing efforts, clearly define your cause and how you want to further it. These can be very pressing and serious issues, or a fun topic you want to dive into with others. You can build off of skills you already have, or work in a way to develop new skills you'd like to have. Limiting your scope of issues, and defining the tactics you use, may seem limiting at first, but this focus is how you improve and become more effective organizers.

Next, consider how a cause may apply to your school specifically, and think of some future goals for the group. Can they be achieved within a few years or are they ongoing?

If you are drawn to an issue area with immediate goals, it may be worth focusing on organizing around a particular campaign. A focused advocacy campaign, like ending the use of Face Recognition Technology (FRT) on campus, can gain support quickly. However, without taking careful steps, this type of organizing can also quickly fizzle out in victory or defeat. If you wish to keep the fight going, you'll want to take a few steps to form a group.

### **MISSION STATEMENTS**

Ideally your group can form an ambitious but realistic long-term goal at your school, and how you hope to achieve it. Instead of "Ban FRT", you may instead aim to "advocate against surveillance tech at school" or "teach students how to protect themselves from surveillance". It's helpful to ask yourself "Why is this important to other students?" Once you have an idea of this long-term purpose and value of your group, summarize it into a short mission statement.

For example:

*Students Opposing Surveillance (S.O.S.) strives for a college campus where students are safe from invasive and often discriminatory surveillance technologies. We pressure the school to consider privacy preserving and non-punitive solutions to problems on campus, and empower students to defend themselves through regular workshops.*

A good mission statement should strike a balance between brevity and precision. Getting across your values and tactics will signal to peers whether the group is right for them, but a long and confusing mission will turn people away.

## FIRST MEETING

Also see: [🔌 Organizing an Event](#)

Once you have a name and a mission, it's usually a good idea to hold a general interest meeting. Set a date, time and location, and give yourself some time to promote it. At many schools an eye-catching flier with meeting and contact information will be effective at targeting fellow students.

For this first meeting, prepare a short introduction to the group, its mission, and a few things you'd like to accomplish in the short-term. Encourage others to speak on why they were interested in attending, and what they'd be interested in working on. Before ending the meeting, establish a way to communicate with attendees and set a time for the next meeting.

## FINANCES AND RESOURCES

How you further your mission will determine how much time and financial support your group needs to be effective. If your work primarily relies on school resources, it may have a low operating budget but need to research and comply with school-specific rules about creating a group. On the other hand, if you primarily organize outside of school, there may be more costs associated with [🔌 organizing an event](#). Consider what baseline level of financial and administrative support you need to be effective, and how much work you're willing to put in to secure it.

Many tactics for a student group are free or inexpensive, a simple fundraiser event may be enough. However, if your work is only possible or worthwhile with a larger budget, you can investigate potential funding sources. Schools themselves will allocate some of their budgets for student groups, especially universities. These usually require a bit of paperwork, but are designed to be less difficult for students.

Seeking funding outside of the school is more complex. Speak with librarians and administrators about getting grants and fiscal sponsors. Keep in mind this complexity means more work and they may not offer enough money to be worth it. If you later rely on this funding for your group, it may also restrain what issues your group can speak out on and what actions you can take. Be careful and read the fine print to be sure funders are aligned with your mission.

## ESTABLISH ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

Also see: [🔌 Community Agreements](#)

If you are starting a group from scratch, you have a lot of freedom in how you want the group to be run. If however you opt for creating a chapter in a larger organization, you'll still need to identify what (if any) leeway you have in how you organize your group. Either way, you'll want to take these steps:

1. With your founders, identify the different tasks and roles required to accomplish the goals described in your mission.
2. Define these roles, and what the minimum expectation is for someone taking it on.
3. Have a clear plan for how these roles are delegated in the future, and how frequently they are changed.
4. Decide on a procedure for changing these roles or making major decisions which affect the whole group.
5. Consider how the members will be accountable, and consider drafting a code of conduct for members.
6. Finally, summarize these decisions in a finalized document agreed upon by the group founders.

## KEEPING YOUR GROUP SAFE

Also see: [🔒 Surveillance Self-Defense](#) or [🔒 Security Education Companion](#)

It's a good idea for every organization to have frank and regular discussions about what risks your group is willing to take, and how to achieve their goals while avoiding unnecessary risks. Depending on the mission of your group this might be agreements which keep you physically safe at events, or rules about how members securely communicate or store information. This can also be a discussion of personal boundaries in your work, so members don't feel pressured into taking more risks than they are comfortable with.

Set time for a closed meeting with core members to put together a security plan, and make sure everyone knows how to follow it. For example, if you decide to coordinate over the secure messaging app Signal, leave some time at the end of the meeting for everyone to learn how to install and use it. You may even want to role play group procedures for high-stress situations, like exercising your rights at a protest. In a new group, be careful about who has access to what information as you grow. Compartmentalize, meaning that people only have access to the sensitive information they need to know.

# BUILDING SUPPORT

Also see: [7 Coalition building with Sign-on Letters](#)

For any student group at any school, it is a good idea to purposefully build out a diverse coalition for support. This might be as simple as finding faculty members or other student groups at school who support your work, or it may involve reaching out to external groups.

## AT SCHOOL

### Faculty and Staff

Finding a faculty advisor may have already been required for establishing your group on campus, but maintaining this connection through regular meetings is important. The right faculty member can provide invaluable expertise on your cause and how your school operates. They can also help keep your group going after you graduate, by relaying the experiences of members. Remember that many issues which impact students also impact workers, including support staff who help the school run. Many workers may also be unionized, and controversial issues affecting these protected workers may garner union support.

If your group aims to change school policy, you'll want to learn the leadership structure of your school or university, and find out who the decision makers are on your issues. At many colleges, librarians and tech support workers will be very knowledgeable about digital rights and privacy issues, and follow internal processes for data handling and software contracts.

### Other Student Groups

Even if your group is the only one focusing on digital rights issues, it is a good idea to build solidarity with groups with other focuses. Consider who is most impacted by your mission, and see if related groups would be interested in working together.

For example, if you are fighting Face Recognition Technology, you may want to reach out to and support BIPOC-lead groups which are unequally impacted by the technology. By working with a diverse network of groups, and maintaining that network beyond one campaign, you will have a better sense of what your group should prioritize to be successful.

Cast a wide net at first, as you might be surprised by which groups support your work. Gauge interest and capacity and slowly grow your work together. Remember, they have a different mission than you, so don't overburden them with your priorities. This loose mutual support may look like [\[\[planning an event\]\]](#) together, creating a [\[\[sign-on letter\]\]](#) or keeping each other up to date on your work with a regular check-in.

Reaching out to established student groups at other schools, especially nearby ones, can also give your work a head start by learning how they do their work. If these schools are in the same governance, these can also be helpful relationships for broader actions. For example, coordinating efforts across universities in the state university system.

## OUT OF SCHOOL / OFF CAMPUS

### Alumni

Alumni who likely care about your mission can be very valuable for organizers. If they were also a student organizer they may have valuable experience to share or relationships with key

decision makers. Colleges care about their reputation with these alumni as well, who are often relied on for donations.

Former students may also have expertise and connections from their job relevant to the issue. This can bring external support to your work and introduce you to other off-campus supporters.

A useful starting point is to look on social media sites like LinkedIn or your school's alumni database, or participating in scheduled alumni events.

### **Community Organizations**

Your school, and especially colleges, have a huge impact on the local town or city. It can be an important public space, a major employer, and have influence in local politics. These connections mean it is likely your issue will affect other people nearby, besides students and staff. [🔗 Street level surveillance](#) technology adopted by a university, for example, impacts everyone passing through campus.

Sometimes it's more effective to engage with city-wide advocacy, in which case you may find aligned non-student advocacy groups. Similar to building relationships with other student groups, slowly build these connections and be clear on your capacity to work on the issue. These outside partners do not have the same academic schedule or workload as you, so take extra care to guard yourself against burnout. When [🔗 organizing an event](#), make sure it's comfortable for students to attend, and be clear about if it is student-only or open to the public.

### **National or International Organizations**

There are many large organizations interested in building helpful relationships with student groups. They may even reach out to you directly with different proposals of how to support your work, or ask you to be a chapter of their organization. Whatever the offer, make sure organizers have a [🔗 community agreement](#) around making these decisions and be more cautious than with other external groups. There are sometimes major obligations that can detract from your work, or conflicts of interest which restrict your group's independence or ability to weigh in on certain issues. Research the group and be upfront about your group's capacity and mission.

For example, Electronic Frontier Alliance is EFF's grassroots alliance open to student groups. EFA emphasizes the autonomy of member groups to be as engaged as they want, and take different positions on issues than EFF. Organizers at EFF connect students with resources, experts, and training to make their work more impactful. See also, [🔗 About EFA](#).

## **TAKE ACTION**

### **PLANNING EVENTS**

Also see: [🔗 Event Organizing](#) and [🔗 Security Education Companion](#)

- Events are very important for student organizing, but can quickly be overwhelming later in the school year. Plan around this by having bigger events when school is less busy, and have fewer and easier events closer to finals.
- Students juggle a lot of deadlines and competing interests, so being predictable with at least some events you hold is essential to growing your work. Consider holding events around important milestones, monthly, or even weekly.

- Whenever it makes sense, try to co-host events with other groups which can help with planning details and promotion.
- Have clearly delegated roles among members beforehand. Try to have a simple procedure, TODO list, or document to help your group quickly identify who is responsible for what, and confirm the group has capacity beforehand.

## UTILIZING SOCIAL MEDIA

Also see: [📱 Social Media Advocacy](#)

- Prioritize your presence on school-specific platforms or relevant online groups.
- Follow accounts relevant to your school and other students. Engaging with each other's content will help promote your work with other students.
- Look for school updates related to your cause you can relay online with your take. Often this news is not widely reported, and has similar benefits to sharing breaking news.
- Going live or “live-tweeting” student events before they start, especially on a college campus or small community, can help drive in-person turnout.

## ENGAGING WITH LOCAL/CAMPUS MEDIA

Also see: [📱 Traditional Media Outreach](#)

- Seek out smaller media outlets specific to your school, like town or student newspapers.
- Consider publishing your own op-eds in student publications.
- College radio stations offer a low-stakes way to practice live interviews while reaching your peers
- Before an in-person event, decide who will speak to the press so no one is cornered into saying something off-message
- Most students don't have media training. If talking to the media is a part of your work, you may want to practice and seek advice from faculty who are familiar with journalism or advocacy.

## SCHOOL-SPECIFIC ACTIONS

Student activists have many tools to enact change at their institution. Here are some ideas that may be appropriate depending on your mission:

1. Canvassing or handing out fliers is effective at schools or campuses due to the concentrated foot traffic.
2. Public schools are typically state entities subject to the state's public records laws. This means it is possible to get information about how your school operates, active contracts, and information about how past decisions were made with a request letter.
3. Walkouts or strikes are a powerful display of unity which may risk punishment, but the disruption can put pressure on the school to reach an agreement on student and worker demands.

## TIPS ON BURNOUT

As noted, students are in a unique position as organizers, and need to balance competing priorities and needs. If left unchecked, these tasks can lead to burnout, where someone runs out of energy, motivation and even their ability to finish their work. It's important for your well being and the well-being of your group to guard against this *before* it is a problem. Here are a few ways to do this:

- Plan group activity around the academic calendar, e.g., avoid big events during finals.
- Set minimum amounts of time you spend on school, work, sleep, fun, self-care, and other obligations. Limit your organizing to make ample space for these minimums
- Routinely check in with yourself and other organizers for stress levels, well before problems emerge. When you notice it, bring it up with others.
- Encourage yourself and others to take breaks from all work, not just moving from one task to another.
- Routinely check your perspective: are you holding yourself to an expectation you'd hold a friend to? How important are the tasks at hand in the grand scheme of things?
- Start and maintain healthy habits with others, like exercise, meditation, and eating nutritious food.
- Media breaks. When world events are stressful or upsetting it can disrupt important recovery time, like weekends or before bed.

Finally, remember that your school will have a number of mental health resources available to you, often including local crisis hotlines.