

Students For Liberty's Student Protests Handbook



First Edition

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A Free Academy, A Free Society



I. Intro

This handbook is intended to provide an introduction to hosting a student protest for liberty. It is not fully comprehensive, but it rather contains recommendations based on the personal experiences of those contributing to the handbook. There may be more effective methods, so, as a result, consider this document as a guide and not a “how to.” As you hold student protests and become more familiar with the tactics and strategies of a successful protest, you will develop your own ideas best tailored to your abilities and the climate of your campus.

Students For Liberty’s Student Protests Handbook is the product of past experiences and practices implemented by many students who have started their own organizations for liberty, compiled into a single document. This is the second edition of the handbook, and the publication of future editions will rely heavily on the input of students like you. If you have additional information you would like to share with others about how to start an organization, criticisms of the information presented in this handbook, or would otherwise like to help in the drafting of future editions, please email info@studentsforliberty.org with the subject “Start an Organization Handbook Comments”. We also love to hear success stories of students who used this book and often highlight student successes through a variety of our communications.

Last, a special thanks goes out to Lee Doren at Bureaucrash for contributing to this handbook and to Bureaucrash and its supporters for making this handbook and SFL’s Student Protests Project possible.

II. Five Steps to Holding a Protest

Step 1: Pick a Meaningful Topic

Before you can come up with the right kind of protest, you need a topic to protest for or against. Keep in mind, that when you protest *against* something, you should also likely offer your *positive* solution. Here is a sample list of topics you may want to consider protesting against (again, remember to give the liberty-loving positive alternative when possible):

- Taxation
- Drug Laws
- Protectionism (protesting for Free Trade)
- Campus Censorship (protesting for Free Speech)
- Gun Control Laws (protesting for the Second Amendment)
- Smoking Bans

The topic you pick needs to be something you are passionate about, something that you are going to be excited to protest for, against, and preferably both. If you are not pumped when you think about holding the protest, it may not be the best idea for you to hold it. However, it can’t just be something that you are passionate about. The topic you choose needs to be something that other students care about in your group and on your campus. The



purpose of a protest is not to just shout your opinions in public and have them fall on deaf ears. The purpose is to make your opinions known so that others pay attention. They are only going to pay attention if the issue is somehow meaningful to them. Regardless of your topic of choice, you should consider how to address an issue that is relevant, or present a new one to make it relevant. Here are some ways to make an issue relevant to other students:

- **National Hot Topics**- This could be a *national hot topic* like healthcare right now. Taking on an issue that everyone and their grandmother are talking about means that people are more likely to pay attention to you than if you talk about an issue from 20 years ago. If you can relate a national topic to the impact on student lives, all the better. This could also be a *campus hot topic* like a change in university policy or a new resolution passed by the student government requiring only “fair trade” coffee to be distributed on campus or a severely restricting alcohol policy (a lot of college students want to lower the drinking age!). Find something that students are likely already talking about and make a demonstration about it. Keep in mind that *your* pet issue might not be the pet issue of the student body.
- **Directly About Student Life**- You can choose an issue that always relates to student life to garner attention. For example, free speech is always a big deal on campus. If your campus receives a “Red Light” rating from the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education¹ for having excessively restrictive speech codes, protesting these restrictions will automatically pique student interest because it’s an ongoing issue in their life.
- **Response to Other Event**- If another organization recently protested on campus or had an event about an issue that you disagree with, it’s best to hold a protest at the same time to raise a voice of opposition right then. However, if you only learn about it after the fact, organizing a counter-protest within a week can still get attention for the opposite side. Either way, try not to let the opposition maintain the upper-hand on your organization.

Step 2: Come Up With a Unique Approach

When we normally think about student protests, the stereotype that comes to mind is the ‘60’s style of gathering on the college green, playing the guitar and singing songs in response to injustice. The reason this is not a popular method of protesting during this age, is due to the fact that it’s an over-used form of protest (or maybe it can be brought back because it hasn’t been used in so long?). It’s no longer unique and doesn’t raise people’s attention to the issue at hand. When students first protested war with love, it was a revolutionary idea. That’s why it became so popular so fast: because no one had done it before. However, if you can revamp this idea by holding an event such as a concert, don’t immediately rule something of the sort out of question. The idea here is to be unique, not trite. To have a successful protest, you need to do something that people are not expecting, something out-of-the-ordinary.

What are some modern examples of unique protest ideas that will make you stand out and attract interest in what you’re doing?

- **Gun Giveaways** – If you’re supporting the Second Amendment, you can give away water guns to people walking by. Or, if you really want to get some attention, ask a local gun manufacturer to

¹ Check out FIRE’s Spotlight at <http://thefire.org/spotlight/>.



donate a real gun to the event. If guns are banned on campus, have a big event where you raffle off a ticket for the gun that the winner receives and can later redeem at the manufacturer or local FFL dealer (make sure you let them know the winner will have to fill out the appropriate 4473 at the location of redemption).

- **Tax Day Smash** – Frustrated with paying your taxes on April 15? One student group once bought a beat up old car, parked it in front of the local Post Office, and let people go to town on it with a baseball bat after they walked out of the Post Office. Who doesn't like to take a swing at coercive taxation?
- **Chains & Duct Tape** – When you tie a person up to a tree and duct tape their mouth as a form of performance art, people are going to wonder what you're doing. The idea behind this is to highlight how students' voices are being silenced by either illegal or illegitimate limitations on students' free speech on campus or in the community.
- **Free Consumption Bake Sale** – On April 20th, consider giving away free brownies along with fliers to raise awareness of the harms of drug laws in society. In general, giving things away is always a good idea.

One of the main points of developing a unique approach to holding a protest is to grab people's attention without forcing it on them. Some student groups seek attention by any means possible, including forcing themselves on others' events and limiting people's free speech in the process. For those of us who believe in the free speech of everyone, and that the truth will come through in a market-place of ideas, should not and cannot utilize similar tactics. So called "street theatre" is an amazing way to get out your message and gather interest, just don't create more opposition than interest in the process.

Step 3: Plan the Protest

So what do you need to plan and when do you need to plan the protest? To answer the latter first, start planning ASAP. Don't delay organizing a protest. It takes lots of time to put a protest together. It's tough to give a specific timeline for how long such organization should take because protests may be planned a month beforehand or just a few days beforehand. However, there is a general order you should follow in planning an event:

1. **Conceptualize** – The first step is to come up with the idea of the event. This should take serious thought to make sure you get the right idea. Don't be bashful about asking Students For Liberty for help in conceptualizing your idea. Additionally, building on the ideas of past successful protests is always encouraged; in short, don't put too much work into "reinventing the wheel," but, instead, spend the most time determining how to make the event successful.
2. **Determine the Goal** – What do you expect to accomplish with your protest? Raise awareness? Get new members for your group? Stop a policy of a statist administration? Whatever the case, always be aware that a successful protest must have an end goal in mind. Furthermore, a *truly* successful protest is one that everyone is talking about for some time to come. Leverage existing methods of communication such as TV stations in your area, your local paper, and *especially*



your campus paper. As a rule-of-thumb, if your goal does not entail getting covered by a lot of media, then your protest will likely be less than successful.

3. **Craft the Message** – Another way of thinking about this is coming up with your sound bites. If the campus newspaper shows up to cover the story (and they should, as it is part of holding any successful protest), you need a clear, concise message that everyone organizing the protest can give them.
4. **Create a Timeline of Events** – What will happen and when will it happen at the event? If it's just one thing the whole time, fine. Consider chopping it up with intermittent events, though, like a speech in a loudspeaker at certain points, or special prizes for people who come at particular times.
5. **Develop a Budget** – If you are going to be buying things for the protest, make sure you budget it out and keep costs as low as possible. Make sure to include some kind of give-away. You should have flyers/pamphlets for people to take away, but including something else like candy or a small toy about the issue can be very memorable.
6. **Organize Volunteers** – Make sure you have a strong number of volunteers at the protest throughout the event. A protest of 1-3 people usually looks pretty sad. Make sure people volunteer for at least 2 hours so they spend enough time at the protest and feel obligated to engage with observers.
7. **Create a Marketing Strategy** – See step 4 for a full description.

Step 4: Market the Protest

You shouldn't just expect to bring 5 people to the center of campus, start a protest, and let people find out about it at their own leisure. Admittedly, with Twitter, texts, and the like, word about what's going on around campus spreads faster today than it did 20 years ago, but that doesn't mean people are going to take notice of what you're doing. You need to tell people about the protest beforehand. In short, there's no such thing as too much advertisement or presence.

Draft up a press release preferably two weeks beforehand (or as soon as you can if you're doing the protest on a moment's notice) and send it to your campus newspaper, the alternative campus newspapers, any campus bloggers of note, the local newspaper, the local news station, local radios, and any other media you can think of. This is the direct way of getting the media to take notice of what you're doing. After that, make a Facebook Event to promote it and invite as many people to join the event as possible, in order to get them to show up and support or oppose you. Then go ahead and let as many student groups know you're hosting the protest as possible. Let your potential allies know, as well as your potential opponents.² In general, you need to let people know about your protest as many ways as possible before it actually happens.

The next step should be to follow up with the media that you've alerted with your press-release. They may have only glanced over it once, forgot about it, or simply been too busy to acknowledge it. You need to make a concerted effort to confirm their attendance about a week to 4 days in advance. The same sort of follow up should be executed with general outreach. That is to say, begin a fliering campaign that alerts the campus and/or community of the event that is coming up. Also, don't forget to

² Note: It's a good thing to let those who are going to disagree with your protest know about what you're doing. If you're lucky, they'll come out to argue, make a big deal of the protest, or even try to do a counter-protest, which will attract more attention and make your event a larger thing on campus than it would be otherwise.



send out updates via your previously set up social networks, send reminder emails, and message updates.

The day before the event can be equally important. Again, there's really no such thing as too much advertisement. Follow up with your media via a quick phone call reminding them of the location and exact time, and make a final push for your general outreach including emails and social network reminders.

When the day of the protest comes, flyer the campus in the morning with announcements of where the protest will be. People may rarely read flyers or do much with them for events far down the road, but if they read about a protest going on in the College Green right now, they may be inclined to take a detour and see what's going on. If nothing else, it can help build a buzz on campus by having people initiate conversations with "did you check out the X protest?" Also, be sure to keep in mind that text heavy and overly "busy" fliers do you no good. Grab their attention quick, give them the information required, and remember that brevity is a virtue with fliers.

Step 5: Execute the Protest

This is perhaps the most stressful, but exhilarating part of the entire process: Executing the protest. No matter how much you plan, no matter how many possibilities you anticipate, you will never be able to anticipate everything. Something will go wrong, your plans might change, or you might face unexpected opposition. You can limit just how many things go wrong, but something will likely not work out. Following the plan you have made for the event, though, will help you out tremendously. In brief, keep on your toes and remember to expect the unexpected and be able to react appropriately, with professionalism.

Some other tips on what to do to execute a good protest:

1. **Bring a List-Serv Sign-Up** – If you aren't able to collect new names for your list-serve and build your membership, you're missing a crucial benefit of running a protest.
2. **Advertise Your Next Event** – Always remember to plug new potential members into your next activity. Have some fliers ready to distribute to interested persons that gives the times and locations of your next function, even if it is something as small as a social event.
3. **Bring a Camera** – You want to have as many pictures of your event as possible for your records, newsletters, and proof of your success. Give it to someone and have them go nuts! Remember to capture pictures at interesting angles and, when possible, be sure to get shots that entail action or that conveys an interesting message. These pictures are much more likely to get reprinted by media. Send your pictures and a description of the protest to info@studentsforliberty.org to have your protest highlighted on SFL's website.
4. **Bring a Video Recorder** – This adds another method of documenting your protest for after the event. YouTube videos of protests can be terrific ways to increase your profile and are even more telling than pictures. Send raw footage and/or YouTube links to info@studentsforliberty.org to have your protest shown to even more people! And, do not hesitate to get it online fast to send out to your local TV stations!
5. **Have Someone Who is Loud** – In case you don't have a megaphone, having one really loud person to shout is always helpful.
6. **Don't Get Caught in the Oppositions Trap** – They want to distract you from hosting your protest successfully. That is to say, if the resident communist decides to pay you a visit and argue with



your membership, respectfully turn them away. Do not, under any circumstance, focus on arguing with them. A good tactic to employ is to have your group's number 1 scholar off to the side of the protest, allowing any dissenters the opportunity to argue away, far away from your protest. Don't let the opposition be the highlight of your event—respectfully let them argue to their hearts content, away from your protest with your scholar.

The most important thing to remember, though, is to HAVE FUN! The point of a protest is expressing your opinion in a creative way, beyond just writing an article or giving a speech. A protest is an opportunity to engage people with your ideas and bring on the debate and energy. If you're not having fun at your protest, you're doing something wrong!

III. Tips on Running a Successful Protest

Tip 1: Community, Networking and finding Allies

Since protests are often a numbers game, working with others is vital to making your event a success. That is why building a community, or network that is willing to collaborate on projects, is vital to running a protest.

Utilize team-based management: Have people assemble into teams that are responsible for taking on various aspects of the protest. Everyone then can come back together with their accomplishments and goals to form the holistic vision and plan for making the protest a complete and group success.

Do not be afraid to call established organizations together for coalition meetings to discuss what they are doing in your community. Be willing to assist them on their projects if they will return the favor and help you on yours. This is the perfect time to discuss your protest ideas; be willing to accept constructive criticism.

Over time, if you can develop a working relationship with like-minded people, future events will run much more smoothly. This will also save time, money and manpower at making your protests work. Remember that few protests are developed by one person alone, and those that are, are rarely seen by a large audience.

Tip 2: Post-Protest Fun

The primary purpose of a protest is to ensure that your message is reached by a large audience to create fundamental change in society. However, the videos and photos from each event should also be used to boost supporter morale and continue to outreach to your audience.

Create a slideshow or a video montage that can be shown to those who attended the protest. Print the pictures and put them on a presentation board to show prospective members how you're active on campus. Host a screening where everyone can watch the final product. Also, don't forget to post the video on YouTube or a blog where your work can be seen by others.



Remember, if people enjoy attending each event, it will be easier to get people to show up to future events. Moreover, there is nothing wrong with meeting people for planned apolitical social gatherings after a job well-done. This is often the best time to brainstorm creative ideas, and it helps to develop bonds between likeminded people. The power of friendship should be encouraged. Make friends, not just members!

Tip 3: Love the Labor

The more work you put into a protest, the more you will get out of it. In short, there is direct correlation between effort and success. Also, keep in mind that the more organized you are before an event, and the more time you give yourself to plan each event, the more prepared you will be to deal with logistical problems. When the event finally comes to fruition, you will remember how much work was required to make it successful.

Tip 4: Take Risks

The most successful protests are often the most creative. Do not be afraid to try something that has never been done before or expand in a creative way on a previously used idea for a liberty based protest. Furthermore, creativity sometimes trumps numbers at an event. If you want to get the media's attention, but don't have 100,000 people marching in the streets for your cause, having a catchy idea may make someone take notice. Give them a multitude of reasons to take notice of your cause.

Tip 5: Let it be Organic

Encouraging supporters to develop their own creative ideas will work wonders toward getting more people involved. Conversely, utilizing a totally top-down approach will reduce the number of people attending the event; the goal is to make everyone believe they have a stake in the outcome.

Leadership means much, much more than simply planning and taking everything on for yourself. A true leader is able to get others involved naturally and make them feel an integral part of your initiative. Offer support for your members, offer your ideas, and more often than not, offer the opportunity for them to take on a part of the plan, and make it their own.

Feel free to let people make their own signs, rather than handing out signs for each person. Creative, hand-made signs also look better than mock and branded signs that everyone has. People should feel compelled to run with their ideas, so long as it is "value added" to the protest and overall idea of accomplishing the protest's goals. Also, if supporters want to change the event, the more flexible you are, the more likely others will work with you as well.

Lastly, remember that Mona Lisa died; you don't have to "paint the perfect picture" for your protest to be successful. If members and supporters enjoy the event, and your message is well-received and covered, then your work has been a success.



IV. What Now?

With this overview of how to run a successful student protest, start working on hosting your own protest! Get together with your student group and brainstorm ideas. When you have a plan, submit a proposal to Students For Liberty's Student Protest Grants to try and get funding for it. If Students For Liberty cannot financially support the protest, but we support the effort, we will still provide connections and non-financial resources to support your group.

Additionally, do not hesitate to contact your regional director. We're all here to resource your active participation on campus and help spread the message of liberty. In reality, we really do love hearing about what our groups are doing and will love to hear how we can help. Let us know about your event and we'll do all we can to help you make it a success!

Applications for Student Protest Grants are available at:

www.StudentsForLiberty.org/College/Groups/Protests/

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