1. How to Start a Student Organization for Liberty

This handbook covers the basic steps of starting a new student organization for liberty. But this isn't just for campuses that currently have no pro-liberty groups – there is much to be said for expanding and diversifying the student liberty movement even within a single campus. Many campuses have had success operating multiple groups; separate in name and structure, but overlapping in membership. This can be useful for dividing labor and focus. For example, one group may be focused on activism or political campaigning, while another is focused on education. Even if the groups share the exact same membership, they can often increase visibility and access to resources. And of course, just because you have an explicitly libertarian group on campus doesn't mean that you are maximizing your reach. There are students who might not feel comfortable joining the 'libertarian' club, but would love to get involved in pro-liberty activism for things like 2nd amendment rights, ending prohibition, opening borders, or studying economics. If your campus already has a liberty organization that is well-established and competently run, consider branching out by starting a new group with a narrower focus to bring in our allies that don't self-identify as libertarian.

Overview: The 8 Steps to Starting a Student Organization

1. Find Others: A student organization is defined by its members. When an organization is being formed, a committed group of individuals who dedicate their time and energy to the organization is crucial. Before you can do anything else, you need to find a small group of students who will make a serious effort to start the organization.
2. Develop a Mission Statement: To be effective, the purpose of your efforts and organization must be clearly laid out so you all know the ends for which you are working. The discussion of your group's purpose should culminate in a mission statement for the organization that all activities are measured against.
3. Come Up With a Name: Once you have established the mission of your organization, you should tailor the name to what you wish to accomplish. The name of the organization is the first thing people will hear, and as first impressions are of the utmost importance, be sure to choose wisely.
4. Learn Your School's Procedures: To effectively run an organization on campus, you must know how to maneuver through your school's bureaucracy. Learn how to reserve rooms, access university funding, gain school recognition, etc. Become as knowledgeable as possible on how student organizations function within your school.

5. <u>Ratify a Constitution</u>: The constitution of a student organization formalizes the organization's existence and lays out the rules for how the organization will operate. Take time in drafting this document and ratify it according to your school's guidelines to make sure it will meet the approval of administrators.
6. <u>Get School Recognition</u>: To make your organization official and institutionalized, you should seek school recognition. Official recognition also confers myriad benefits from the school that will help ensure the success of your organization.
7. <u>Develop a Strategic Action Plan</u>: With the establishment of your organization, you should agree on tangible goals for the upcoming semester/year and develop a strategy for achieving these goals. These goals and strategies are summarized in the Strategic Action Plan.
8. <u>Set Up Communications Infrastructure</u>: You will need avenues of communication to share official messages from your group, most likely in the form of an e-mail list-serve and perhaps an official website. You may also want other communication systems to promote informal discussion, idea-generation, and networking.

Step 1: Find Others

Once you've decided that you're interested in starting a student organization for liberty, an immediate problem arises: an organization of one is no organization at all. Before you can do anything else, you must seek out others who are interested in starting an organization with you and bring them into the effort. Beyond this basic analysis, there are various other reasons why your first step when starting a student organization should be to find other students. First, starting an organization takes a lot of work. Having others there to take responsibility for different aspects of starting an organization and getting it off the ground is the only way to actually start a group. Second, there is power in numbers. One person trying to make a change on campus looks radical, and won't be taken seriously. A group trying to make a change looks reasonable and demands respect.

How do you find others to join you in undertaking the incredible task of starting a student organization? Here are a few recommendations:

- *Networking:* You can look for potential leaders everywhere you go. In class, in line for the keg, at conferences – in short, anywhere there are students. Talk about the ideas of liberty and see who is receptive. You don't need students who have read the completed works of Mises to start your group, you just need students who are dedicated to liberty. The more you talk about the ideas, the more you will find others who are willing to "come out of the liberty closet" and join you.
- *The Internet*
  - *Facebook*
    - *Targeted*: Post in Facebook groups related to the organization you want to start. This could include groups focused on broad

academic areas like philosophy, political science, economics, and international relations. It could also include single-issue groups that fit within the liberty movement, such as groups focused on gun rights, LGBT rights, substance legalization, or peaceful foreign policy. Facebook has reintroduced a search feature that allows users to search their networks for something like "People who go to X University and like Ron Paul."

- *Blind*: Post about the group on your personal Facebook wall to see who else in your network may be interested. Post in large groups like that of the incoming freshman class.

o *Student Organization Directory*: Most schools have some sort of directory of existing student organizations. You can almost always find it by googling the name of your university along with the words "student organization directory." Look for existing student groups that cater to students who are likely to be interested in liberty.

- *Flyer Campus*: Create a promotional flyer for your fledgling group and include your contact information. Dedicate an afternoon or two to plastering the campus – post your flyer in the dormitories, cafeterias, libraries, academic halls, bathroom stalls, etc…

- *Other Organizations*: Ask the leaders of groups like the College Republicans, College Democrats, Debate Team, Model U.N., Mock Trial, Political Science Honors Society, Economics Honors Society, etc. to let their members know you are starting a new group. Even better, ask for the opportunity to discuss your new group at one of their meetings and speak with interested students in person.

- *Table.* Bring a table with SFL resources to the campus lawn, attach a banner or sign, and see who's interested.

Step 2: Develop a Mission Statement

Once you have a group of students who are dedicated to starting the organization, you must agree upon a common vision. The mission statement should be 1-3 sentences that touch on the activities (the how) and the values (the why) of your organization.

There are three general types of activities that you can engage in:

- *Networking:* Networking involves providing a forum where individuals of a common belief may come together to meet one another. Having an organization that brings students who support liberty together leads to the mutual encouragement for individuals to stay strong in their beliefs and develop their enthusiasm for liberty.

- *Education*: Education is important because no student, not even yourself, is an expert on the philosophy of liberty. As part of an institution of learning, your organization will be missing an incredible opportunity to teach others about your

beliefs if you do not make education fundamental to your organization's activities.

- *Activism*: The general theme underlying activism is an effort to make some sort of change in society. Activism could mean holding protests or demonstration against a new city ordinance. It could mean taking on an illegitimate speech code at your university by writing op-eds to the school paper and petitioning the administration.

A student organization is more than capable of performing all three types of activities at once. It's important to think about what you want to get out of the organization and what sort of change you hope to make.

The values of your organization are your own. What do you want to promote? The sanctity of the individual? Natural Rights? Human flourishing? Non-Aggression? It's up to you, but keep in mind that for the group to grow to its fullest potential, you want to have a more general mission so as to incorporate as many allies as possible. For example, if your group's mission is to promote an Objectivist philosophy of liberty, you may be turning off potential non-Objectivist allies. If you want your group to realize its fullest potential, it may be wise to keep your mission-statement about liberty more broadly, and not focus on a specific facet of or justification for libertarian philosophy. A major part of the reason SFL has seen so much success in such a short amount of time is that we promote liberty in its broadest sense (see Mistake #2 below).

Step 3: Develop a Name

The organization's name is, quite literally, the way you are known on campus. The terms you include and the acronym it spells out will produce immediate connotations in the minds of listeners, so you must make sure that it conveys the right message. It should represent the

mission of your organization in as appealing a manner as possible. Some terms that merit special consideration include:

- *Libertarian*- This term will make people associate you with the Libertarian Party whether you want them to or not. Still, as the most well-known brand for our philosophy, it's worth considering.
- *Liberty*- Liberty is a safer word to use. The term connotes only good things in people's minds. It also leaves open the possibility of various views on the subject. But this may also be its downside. When you advocate for liberty, people are not necessarily sure what exactly you support and so further clarification may be necessary. Some groups have adopted the term "individual liberty" to make their purpose more explicit, which you may want to consider as well.
- *Freedom*- "Freedom" or "Free" is similar to liberty in its connotations.

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- *College/Campus*- If you include the term "college" or "campus" in your name, you suggest an affiliation with a partisan organization.[1]

Step 4: Learn Your School's Procedures

With the foundations of an organization in place, it's important for you to take the time to learn just how student organizations function within your school's bureaucracy. Each school has procedures in place for dealing with student groups that you need to learn to survive. You will have to operate within the university's bureaucracy, so you need to figure out it works. Here are some important things you should learn from the outset:

- What are the requirements for becoming a recognized student organization?
- How do you reserve rooms on campus for events or meetings?
- Are there restrictions to reserving rooms on campus?
- What sorts of events are allowed on campus?[2]
- How can you receive school funding for your organization?[3]
- How can you get around as much of the school's red tape as possible?

There are two important and complimentary ways to learn this information. The first is to talk with school administrators, who should be more than happy to walk you through the process, answer any questions, or direct you to the appropriate document, policy, or administrator. Make sure to be friendly and smile – you need to stay on their good side as they control your access to the school's resources. If you really want to stand out ahead of other student groups on campus, bring some candy to hand out to the administrators. The second is to talk with peers who have experience with running groups at your school. Try and form a relationship with the president of another activist organization on campus, and ask them to help walk you through the process and offer insight from their experience.

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[1] E.g. College Democrats and College Republicans.

[2] It is important to keep in mind that some events, like protests or demonstrations, may only be allowed in "free speech zones" on your campus. Many such zones still exist that only permit students to speak freely in designated areas at designated times. If you don't comply with such regulations, you may be severely sanctioned. If restrictive speech policies are in place on your campus or you find that your organization may be sanctioned for what you consider to be legitimate activities on campus, contact the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (www.thefire.org), a watchdog organization that can give advice on how to properly handle your situation.

[3] The issue of accepting funding from you school is controversial for advocates of liberty. Some see no problem with this practice. Others believe it's a means of forcefully taking money away from other students to support a particular ideology. Ultimately, your organization will have to decide which side of this issue you agree with. But one thing that's important to keep in mind is that every student chose to attend your school freely and if you don't use the money to support liberty, others will use it to hinder liberty.

Step 5: Ratify a Constitution

To formalize your organization and begin the process of institutionalization, you need to draft and ratify a constitution. The purpose of this is not to explicate every detail of the organization, but to provide the general framework in which it will function. Some schools have no regulations for the structure of a constitution, whereas other schools require particular sections be included in the constitution. Here are some essential sections that you should cover in your constitution:

- Name
- Mission Statement
- Executive Board
    - Structure of the Board (roles, responsibilities, and expectations of each position)
    - Selection of the Board (both when and how)
- Membership policy (Will you charge dues? What is the procedure for becoming a member, if there is any?)
- Amendments
- Decision-making Apparatus
- Ratification

Step 6: Develop a Strategic Action Plan

Why are you starting this organization? What do you want to see it accomplish? How are you going to accomplish this? These are the main questions you now need to ask yourself and answer. You should think in terms of tangible and intangible, short-term and long-term. We won't go into too much detail here: see the Strategic Action Plan Handbook for more information.

Step 7: Get School Recognition

Benefits that groups are often afforded from recognition include university funding, easy access to university space, ability to register in student activities fairs, greater ability to flier campus, etc. Some costs that you should take into account include requirement to attend meetings for student government, limitations of mission given the ideological nature of your organization, greater accountability for actions to the university, and limitations on marketing strategies given university restrictions.

This step is entirely dependent on your school's policies. It may be that the benefits from gaining recognition are not worth the many costs you must incur to do so. If the university administration provides an excessive number of roadblocks to starting a recognized club, don't feel compelled to seek formal recognition. Many successful organizations have no university affiliation. The most important thing that makes a club successful are the people, not the affiliation. Generally, however, gaining recognition is important to making people take your organization more seriously and accessing school resources, including such a basic resource as space to hold meetings.

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Step 8: Set Up Communication Infrastructure

It's a good idea to have a few different avenues of communication for different purposes. You'll need a listserve for sending official club correspondence, a Facebook group for informal discussion and idea sharing, and a Facebook page for promotion of the club's efforts and activities. You may also want a website and a blog. The list-serve should be a single email address that you, other executive officers, and perhaps members, can easily type in and send out to a large number of people. You should not type in every person's email address into the "to" box because it looks extremely unprofessional, you will inevitably make a mistake in who you're sending the message to, and people will start replying-all to the list-serve and cause many members to take themselves off. Use either a Google Groups list-serve or a university list-serve account depending on your preference. Either one works. (Many, if not most, student organizations use Google Group list-serves[4] to avoid university bureaucracy, costs with getting a list-serve address, and other problems associated with a school address.) Once you have a list-serve set up add as many people to it as possible, and make sure to keep it active so they know that your organization is active.

Conclusion: Ten Most Common Mistakes

It is no shame to admit when you make a mistake. In fact, student leaders who say they have never made a mistake are wrong and probably bad leaders. To successfully start and lead an organization you must be reflective and self-critical. You must be able to learn from your mistakes and refuse to repeat them. The mistakes listed below are some of the most common ones committed by individuals who have started student organizations dedicated to liberty

Mistake #1: Too much time on the Constitution.

Many student groups think that the Constitution defines the organization. This is wrong. The membership and the mission statement define the organization. The constitution is a tertiary issue to getting the right people to join and holding the right events. Think of it like the U.S. Constitution – while it provides a framework of structure and constraints, it does not encompass specific legislation or policy. In the same way, your group's constitution provides structure but is not used to explicate the specific activities of the organization.

Mistake #2: Specifying too many principles of the organization.

For students passionate about liberty, it is an easy trap to start inserting every principle that you believe in into the organization's Constitution. This is bad for two reasons, though. First, your mission statement should be as concise as possible so you

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[4] To set up a Google Groups list-serve, just go to www.groups.google.com. Complete the basic details and send out an invitation to everyone to join. You do not need a Google email account to sign up for the group. (But if you don't have a Gmail account yet, you should consider doing so because it is easier to send large files with.) From there out, you can just add people to the list-serve or send invitations for them to join.

can clearly explain the organization to new members and potential donors easily. Second, you want to allow for debate, otherwise, the organization will be boring and you will lose the support of those who have minor disagreements.

Mistake #3: Not willing to kill projects.

In the initial phases of starting an organization, it is easy to believe that the entire organization rests on continuing every project you started with. If a student newspaper was one of three activities you began, you think that you will be killing the organization if you kill the newspaper. But if a project or activity is just taking up time and resources without delivering some sort of value (raising awareness to an issue, bringing in new members, etc.), then you need to be willing to kill it or alter it drastically so it adds more value than it costs. For example, it may be the right move to switch from a newspaper to a cheaper and easier to produce web blog format.

Mistake #4: Assuming people know of your existence.

Fireworks do not erupt in the sky spelling out your organization's name the minute you ratify your constitution. No one knows you exist. It is your job to let people know, and it will take hard work to establish a well-known organization. Put your efforts into publicizing your existence through flyers, tabling, activism, and social and traditional media.

Mistake #5: Failure to set Goals

Many student organizations are founded with only a glimmer of an idea of what they want the organization to look like. Few actually set goals for what they want to accomplish and hold as markers of success, but doing so is crucial to making sure you are on track to founding a stable organization.

Mistake #6: Only using one marketing tactic.

Many groups try to be tech-savvy and only utilize new media to advertise events. Creating a Facebook event or sending an email to your list-serve *is not enough* to really advertise your organization. A diversity of tactics is necessary ranging from Facebook to campus flyering to inviting classes to word of mouth. Use every means available to promote your organization and events to make sure that every potentially interested student can participate.

Mistake #7: Not delegating responsibility.

Many students who start organizations have difficulty delegating responsibility. Since they start the organization and are the momentum driving the group, they try to do everything for it. This leads to many, many problems regarding the long-term viability of the organization. Future leaders are not trained, the leader becomes too strained to effectively complete tasks, and the organization is ultimately just one person rather than

an organization. Make sure to have other people complete tasks and take charge of the organization, not just yourself.

Mistake #8: Failing to have responsible oversight when delegating responsibility.
    When new leaders do delegate responsibility, they often hope that people will complete ambiguous tasks with no oversight. The result is often disappointment and failed projects. When you give assignments to others, follow up with them to see how the project is going. Set deadlines and hold people accountable.

Mistake #9: Ignoring other groups.
    When students are staring out, not only do they often think people know about them, they think that they can function independently of the rest of the campus community. They think that having a few people show up each week to argue about foreign policy is enough. They think that other groups are evil and so ought to be ignored. This leads to stagnant and ultimately meaningless organization. The best organizations not only recognize the importance of other groups, they embrace other groups, even those with opposing ideologies. Using other organizations to promote your group is key when starting out, and contra-positing one's organization against others can help you create a niche that had not existed before, and which many students on campus will identify with and join.

Mistake #10: Only looking at today and tomorrow, not next year.
    The final mistake to mention is perhaps the easiest to make for both those starting a student organization and those running an existing organization: only looking at the present, not the future. Successful leaders don't just think about the event coming up this week or this month. They think about the events that will come up next year, and the year after that, and the people who will be running them. If you want to create a truly successful organization, you must start planning today for one, two and five years from now. Think about who will take over. Think about what role the group will play in campus affairs. Think about what you will be doing to help out because you will no longer be a student. Ignoring these questions means the organization is doomed to failure.