

Organizing around Legislative Issues on a College Campus

“Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching to the Gospel, or, in other Words, of the Church’s mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation”

-World Synod of Bishops, *Justice in the World, in Justice in the Marketplace*, 1985

Step 1: Gather a group to dialogue and prepare for an action

A. Pick issues that relate to students:

- Do you have international students on campus whose home countries are in turmoil?
- Does your college or university offer the ROTC program?
- What is the campus debate surrounding the issue of homosexuality?
- What does the community outside the campus look like—urban sprawl, issues of poverty/homelessness?
- Does your school take a trip to the School of the Americas (WHINSEC)?
- What service trips are offered—what is the environment like in those areas?



The main goal is to pick issues that students are passionate about, issues that affect them personally, issues that they can unite and bring a common purpose to.

B. Envisioning: which categories do the issues fall under? Do they cross over into each other?

- Economic
- Political
- Socio/cultural
- Religious

C. Learn about the political process together. Many college students do not know their own Senators or Representatives! It is important to know who you are voting for and who is representing you in Congress. Sometimes you can organize with several Congressional representatives based on the hometowns of different students.

D. Get to know the people in your group

- What has brought you together?
- What skills, gifts, and talents are being brought to the group?
- What areas do you need to work on or develop together?

E. Determine the status of your group:

Most often you will be made up of students. Perhaps faculty members will take part or even members of the local community—involve them, especially if the issue is one affecting the college/university or outside community. These people are veterans and can offer their opinions and past experiences.



Step 2: Narrow the issues



A. **Focus on one at a time** so that your efforts can be strengthened.

B. **Ask systemic questions:**

- Why is this an issue?
- Who does it affect?
- Why are they being affected?

Step 3: Explore the issue in-depth

A. **Do some research** to stay best informed about current legislation and policies. Seek out various news sources (from print and electronic media to news from outside the U.S.) to get the best understanding of the situation.

B. **Analyzing and interpreting the issue**

- How are people experiencing this?
- What are the real life stories? If you know people who have been affected, use their stories to send a strong message.
- What is the broader context?
 - Social/cultural factors: race, ethnicity, gender
 - Economic factors: federal budget, poor vs. rich, global connections
 - Political factors: How is power used? Who has it? Who doesn't?
- What does your group think about the issue? How does/does it not fulfill your mission?



Step 4: Take direct steps against the injustice



A. **Dialogue about solutions;** demonstrate social change:

- Direct service—engaging in works of charity that serve the immediate needs of those who require assistance
- Advocacy—engaging in works of justice to ensure that long-term solutions are met so that people will need less direct service (empowering them to create change in their own lives)

B. **Identify where your action will be targeted**

- Who are the best people to work with on this situation?
- Who are the tougher critics that will pose a challenge to your goals?
- Does your issue impact student on campus, the local community, the larger world?

These questions will help identify where the action should be directed.

C. Start to act! Implement the planned actions towards those you are trying to influence

- Check on local, state, national legislators—what do they have to say about your issue? If they have not made a statement, find out if they are aware of how it affects their constituents. Remember, it is your job to inform them of the issues affecting people!
 - Find voting records
 - Call local offices
 - Listen to each other—fellow constituents have a lot to offer
- Remember that you aren't just trying to influence a legislator, but you are also coming into contact with other people along the way (fellow students, faculty/staff, community members, local media, businesses, etc.) and advocating for their needs sometimes, too.

Possible actions:

- Public events such as vigils and demonstrations
- Letter writing
- Petitions
- Phone calls
- Visit local offices
- Letter to the editor and/or articles in campus newspaper
- Voter registration and education
- Volunteer for local candidates
- Gather a group to learn/discuss the candidates and their platforms
- Hold on-campus debates about the issues

Step 5: Carry out the action!

Step 6: Dialogue, reflection, and follow-up

- What went well? How would you do it differently next time?
- Is there more work to be done?
- If you contacted representatives, follow-up with them. Make sure they are acting on their word and thank them whether they acted the way you wanted them to or not.
- Celebrate your successes!
- Plan for future work



Written by Jennifer Haut, who was a student organizer at Loras College in Dubuque, Iowa, and a summer intern at NETWORK in 2005. Jennifer now works with Wellstone Action, and is on the NETWORK Education Program Board.

