

How-To: Getting a Mandate

For: Ontario Student Coalition Website - TBD

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Adapted From:

Mehreen & Brett. 2012. Creating Departmental or Faculty Associations: For Direct and Participative Democracy to Empower All Members, v1.0.1. Free Education Montreal.

Charaoui & Savard. 2012. Organize To Strike, Fight To Win! Quebec's 2012 Student Strike.

www.studentstrike.net

I. Preamble

In the current climate of academia, the freedom to engage within it as one may see fit is increasingly difficult to attain. As such, the following presents a guide of rigorously tested, globally applicable, and regularly employed methods by which to organize yourself and your colleagues to restore this balance. The following charts a continuum of actions, and while it is not necessary to follow them in perfect order, they do represent decades of feedback regarding the balance of attainable outcomes and the workload which can reasonably be expected of volunteers and others who offer support out of passion.

Guidelines and assumptions on which this guide is founded include:

(1) General Assembly

The General Assembly (GA) is the ultimate decision making forum for any particular level of political discourse. GAs provide collectively decided upon mandates which direct the actions of the association. GAs may be scheduled at any time by the association, or individual member collecting minimum signatures as outlined by local agreements.

(2) Debate and Discussion

All spaces are forums of active and academic debate and discussion.

(3) Direct Democracy

Any decision-making structure mentioned herein is completely horizontal. That is to say, there are no power dynamics implicit whatsoever. Every member involved is an equal expression in all processes, regardless of the hours worked in any executive capacity. This has been widely written on, and details can be found elsewhere.

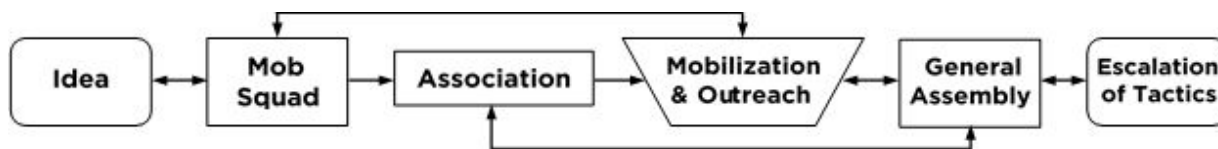
(4) Elected Representative Accountability

All elected representatives do not make decisions on behalf of others, and are directly accountable to the General Assembly.

(5) Local Autonomy

All recommendations made herein are intended to be manipulated as to the local situation of the campaign, so as to reflect those local struggles going forward.

This guide will discuss organization at the departmental/faculty level up to holding your first GA, getting to the point of having members provide a mandate for future direction and decision making. However, **the level of organization is not a rigid boundary**. The scale of the organization may vary depending on those enrolled, or the levels of cohesion within particular groups of the department/faculty. For example, the graduate and undergraduate students of a history department may organize for their own GAs, and will have their individual issues better organized and represented at other GAs of different scale. The following is a diagram of key stages, and can be used as a checklist.



Self-Care Note: It is important to mention up front that remaining in a realistic mindset through these stages is critical. In other words, this will take much work. There will be far fewer people than you expect through initial passion, but this is normal. Sustained and effective actions can take years to work on. Keep this in perspective.

1. Ideas and a Mobilization Committee (Mob Squad)

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To start, it is critical to form a group of at least 2 or 3 committed activists within the unit to be organized who can meet regularly and exchange ideas effectively. Encourage the members of this group to be open and inclusive about the group's purpose, and encourage correspondence and invitation to future meetings and events. Keeping organized record of consensually-collected contact information (email, phone) from this point on is important. Use this contact information to schedule meetings (weekly during important mobilization times) and other meeting-related information (dietary restrictions, etc.). It is important to use

this collected contact information as a logistics tool, and to keep discussions at the meetings or on personal time. If financially possible, include a meal or snack option at the meetings to make them sociable and less intimidating.

Mob Squad Roles:

- (1) Ensure a safe space for other members of the squad.
- (2) Engage in and decide on effective dialogue to engage your departmental colleagues – what is going on, and why it is important. Once the message is decided, use the mobilization techniques outlined below.
- (3) Work on collecting the emails of **everyone** in your department.
 - a. List from department secretary
 - b. Passing lists in classes, with announcements of decided-on dialogue (more below).
- (4) Make sure to never claim to represent anyone. A Mob Squad is not a GA, despite how motivated the group may feel.

2. Creating an Association

There are different ways of creating a departmental or faculty association, all of which are acceptable, and vary along time efficiency and best practice. It is important to keep in mind that what is being created is, for current intents and purposes, *ad hoc* – that is, timed for a specific purpose. There is no need to worry about budgets or documentation at this stage for legal purposes, but be sure to keep vigilant.

This step depends on the approach you took as a Mob Squad. It is fundamental that a face-to-face contact of some kind be made before calling the first GA. Two approaches can be taken:

(A) Direct to Founding GA

If you are collecting an email list by completing class visits, use that opportunity to talk about the founding GA. This is your face-to-face opportunity. Before engaging the class visits, have a couple people from the squad organize the GA itself (set a time, book a room, get food, draft agenda, etc.). Invite everyone to the founding GA, making clear in materials and spoken word that the structure will be created, the by-laws drafted, and that the opportunity to be on a committee is open, in addition to other matters. Include in the agenda of the founding GA that a by-law committee will be struck to form the association. More on GAs below.

(B) Petition First

The petition method, while more time-consuming, has the advantage of making your initial face-to-face opportunity one-on-one as well. Stopping folks around campus or in their classes and having a discussion pursuant to the dialogue the Mob Squad has outlined is a very effective way to engage people. The petition may be based on a statement of the need to have a GA to form the

association to combat the particular issue. Once a quorum has been reached (1-5% is a good assumption to start with), point A above can be started.

If your Mob Squad contains members with the knowledge or enthusiasm, drafting a set of by-laws to present to the GA (or a potential by-law committee) beforehand may be effective in establishing further legitimacy with those interested and expedite the process in general.

3. Outreach and Mobilization

The effectiveness of any outreach and mobilization efforts follow a gradient of human interaction. Open, personable, and friendly one-on-one interactions are the most efficient, encouraging those interacted with to continue the discussion. An important strategy for effective mobilization is continuity, built on the one-on-one interactions – reinforcing the discussions with larger scale actions that illustrate and draw an easy connection to the scope of the issue.

This is the stage where the Mob Squad or newly formed association is afforded some artistic licence. Within the horizontal framework, it is critical to allow people to complete tasks as they see fit and as they feel empowered to do so. Each person involved brings their own view of how the issue affects their social network, and how best to reach those people. Let the writers write, the designers design, or the speakers speak, as it were. Some examples of mobilization techniques proven effective are outlined below:

(1) One-on-one discussions/petitioning

The most effective.

(2) Class visits

Condensed discussion time, sustained attention.

(3) Tabling

Good for times of high-volume mobilization and material distribution, but limits discussion space to high traffic areas. Good as a hub for more personable action.

(4) Speaker Session

Invite a professor/graduate student/off-campus person to speak to the issue. Opens discussion, creates space for more personable actions.

(5) Flash Mobs

More fun version of a speaker session. Gauge the fun vs. academic balance of your departmental colleagues.

(6) Banner Drop

If you have crafty folks, dropping a banner for everyone to see is a good way to remind people of the issue ongoing.

(7) Posters/Flyers/Handbills/Wearables/Videos/Images/Memes

Take home information and reminder. Put them everywhere. Write on/edit them – notes, contact information, quotes, poems, or anecdotes.

4. Holding a GA

The GA is the ultimate decision making body of the organization and should be treated as such and organized appropriately for maximum legitimacy. If at your first GA you do not have by-laws, that assembly will be solely for that purpose, and the second assembly to debate and ratify that document. If this is the case, this should lead the agendas of both assemblies. However, as urgency permits, these formal processes can be completed over subsequent GAs so as not to create an uninspiring space from the beginning.

As a general template, the following is a draft agenda for an efficient founding GA:

Draft agenda:

1. Appointment of facilitator, minute taker (and mood checker, if possible)
2. Explaining procedures
3. Reading and approval of the agenda
4. (Creation of committee for writing of by-laws / ratification of the by-laws)
5. Discussion (committee of the whole)
 - a. Current issue (ex. austerity measures, tuition, program closure, etc.)
6. Motions/propositions (often comes out of the discussions)
7. Next GA
8. Adjournment

A facilitator and secretary guide and record debate for unbiased and effective proceedings. If necessary, a mood watcher can be appointed to anonymously maintain balance in the mood of the meeting attendees. Reading and approving the agenda ensures all attendees have a chance to speak to what is important to them. Keeping the GA open to all and debate and discussion open is critical to feelings of progress.

(A) Preparing for the GA

At the very least, book a room. It can be difficult to estimate attendance, but it is best to slightly underestimate the room size, and have the booking confirmed a week beforehand ideally. Next, be sure to organize applicable technologies (computer/projector/public address system/extension cords/etc.) to take and display minutes or make sure the facilitator is heard. Provide ample copies of documents such as the agenda or any supporting information (or voting cards/secret ballot cards, if necessary), and make available at the entrance.

(B) Getting a Mandate

The discussion period of the meeting allows time to debate the issues of the membership, such as attending conferences, taking a position on an issue, or directing mobilization efforts. If one were

to pursue a mandate, it is critical to engage in this debate. Following discussion, a more formal proposition of the desired mandate is presented, and voted upon.

Once the founding GA has been held, and the initial by-laws are ratified, the gears are officially in motion. The association is at the will of the GA, and it is up to those engaged members to continue to mobilize and progress this new movement. Founding an association in this manner will, should the GA mandate it, allow votes in larger scale organizations for organized representation beyond campus.