

ACLU Student Group Start-Up: The First Steps

Starting an ACLU student group can be challenging, but it is a great process to go through — and the result is more than worth it. The purpose of this document is to provide guidance as you navigate the sometimes rough waters of building and maintaining a new organization.

What is the ACLU?

The American Civil Liberties Union of Massachusetts is a private, not-for-profit non-partisan organization that promotes and defends civil liberties and civil rights through legal, legislative, and public education programs. The ACLU of Massachusetts is an affiliate of the national ACLU. We have more than 22,000 members in Massachusetts and almost 500,000 nationwide. The main office is located in Boston. We also have a Worcester County Chapter and a Western Massachusetts legal office located in Northampton.

Since the founding of our Bill of Rights Education Project in 1987, the ACLU of Massachusetts has been working to promote civil liberties through public education and activism, and has empowered students to take a stand for the principles enshrined in the Bill of Rights. Students have taken the initiative to start ACLU groups at some Massachusetts high schools and there are also ACLU clubs at several colleges, universities, and law schools.

In the wake of the crisis facing civil liberties since the attacks of 9/11, the ACLU is committed to strengthening the support it gives students who want to start and maintain ACLU clubs on their high school and university campuses.

Getting Started

At most colleges and universities starting a new campus organization is a relatively easy, if not overly bureaucratic task. In order to become an officially recognized group there will be a number of steps that must be accomplished. Typically, these include writing a constitution, a mission or vision statement, and filling out some forms. Obviously, specific requirements will vary from campus to campus. Get started by contacting the office at your school that governs student organizations. It will provide you with the forms, deadlines, and if you are lucky, guidance necessary to become an official campus organization.

While schools tend to support new student organizations regardless of politics, sometimes public schools provide a first civil liberties issue for their students to get involved in by refusing to allow ACLU groups to form as officially recognized clubs or by refusing them equal access to benefits available to clubs. The ACLU staff can work with student club leaders to secure their equal access to school programs. If you run into problems, contact ACLU of Massachusetts for help.

We're Official, Now What?

Once your organization is official, it's time to start becoming active in your campus community. Start by having a meeting and make getting non-founding individuals to the meeting a priority. There are a few tried and true methods for convincing strangers to attend a meeting.

1. **Flyer, Flyer, Flyer.** If you do only one thing, this is it. Flyer the entire campus with advertisement for your meeting. Make them visually and verbally provocative to be sure they are noticed. For example, use colored paper instead of white. Have them ask questions like "Worried about Civil Liberties?" or "Want to help protect Civil Liberties." Also, be sure your flyer clearly gives the Time, Date, and Location of your meeting. Finally, provide contact information. Often times someone that wants to get involved with the group but cannot attend the meeting will email or call and ask to be added to your mailing list.
2. **Table Time.** A mainstay of student groups is setting up informational tables in highly populated student areas – this is called tabling. You are going to be doing a lot of it – no harm in starting early. If you have the person power and decide to do this, the ACLU of Massachusetts will be happy to provide materials to give out to interested individuals. Also, while tabling is a privilege granted to all official campus organizations, space usually needs to be booked. Contact the office that oversees student organizations to find out the procedure.
3. **What are Friends For?** To attend your meetings! Got friends? Make them come and tell them to bring their friends. Sometimes people whom are not initially interested change their tune after attending a meeting.

The First Meeting

The first meeting is the same as a first impression – you want it to be a good one. People are much more likely to come to a second meeting if they were impressed / enjoyed the first. That being said, running a meeting is not easy. Here are some tips to make sure you succeed.

- **Make an Agenda.** This tip cannot be stressed enough. First, the process of making an agenda will help you to clarify the goals of and organize your meeting. Second, handing each attendee an agenda will give them the impression that you know what you're doing and have a clear vision. Presenting such an image is an important step in convincing people that your organization is one of which they want to be a part.
- **Break the Ice.** Begin by introducing yourself and explaining why you chose to start an ACLU campus group. Next, have each attendee introduce him or herself and say why they came. This will help eliminate some of the tension that having

a roomful of strangers can sometimes produce. It will also help bring people together by demonstrating their shared visions.

- **Have a Plan.** Have at least one idea that you want to begin working on immediately, even if it is a small one. This demonstrates leadership and will make people want get involved. As the group develops, you can make it a more democratic process. However, asking people that aren't even sure they want to be involved what the group should do first makes it seem like you don't have much of a plan or vision.
- **Give Them a Reason to Come Back.** For many people, the difference between attending one meeting and becoming an active member can be as small as being asked to do a task for the group. People are more likely to continue their involvement with an organization if they feel that they have a stake in its success. Thus, try to give potential members responsibility, however small, from the get-go. Doing so will make them feel important to the group and greatly increase the chance that they will remain involved.
- **Contact Information is Key.** This rule goes for any meeting or event. Get the email address and contact information of every person that attends! Once they walk away, there is no guarantee they're coming back. Be sure you can get in touch.

What Kind of Activities can My Group Undertake?

There are many different activity options available to ACLU campus groups. Clubs are encouraged to sponsor speakers, forums, teach-ins, debates and film showings on timely civil liberties topics and important historical milestones. These events can be co-sponsored with other clubs to form relationships and increase turnout. Clubs may also want to sponsor information tables to distribute ACLU literature, and to submit articles to campus publications.

Your club can monitor civil liberties on campus and if necessary take action around school policies relating to civil liberties – examples are overly broad student Internet use policies, due process violations, censorship of publications, the FBI on campus, and restrictions on the right to assembly and protest.

Student clubs can play an important role in organizing around specific post 9/11 civil liberties concerns, and work to pass resolutions on campus upholding civil liberties. They can also participate in ACLU post 9/11 campaigns, including the effort to get a resolution upholding civil liberties passed by the State Legislature. Interested law students can help us develop our new internet-based curriculum on civil liberties issues.

A Few Ideas

1. Create a "Dissent is Patriotic" campaign. This can include a First Amendment teach in; street theater; tabling; the screening of films dealing with periods of repression such as the Red Scare of the 1950s and early 60s; organizing a rally; taking a stand (possibly with the state ACLU affiliate) when universities institute policies that restrict student and staff free speech activity and academic freedom.
2. Educate the campus about the need to work for fair privacy principles to protect students. Hold a forum on how the USA PATRIOT Act impacts student records; conduct a survey of students to see how they feel about the loss of some of their rights under FERPA (the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act); raise consciousness about domestic warrantless spying by the National Security Agency; write articles/letters to the student newspaper about student privacy issues and about government plans to track students; join with ACLU clubs across the nation and work in coalition with other groups to pressure the US Department of Education (through e-activism) to drop its plans for tracking students.
3. Express your concerns about post PATRIOT Act issues on campus through a petition to the administration bearing signatures of large numbers of students. Ask the administration if law enforcement (including the FBI and immigration officers) have requested information on any students or classes of students, and whether the request was accompanied by subpoenas; whether they complied with the request; whether the administration informed the targeted student that their information was being sought. You can also ask for clarification of search and internet and library surveillance procedures and whether members of the campus police are working with and reporting to the FBI (as they have been at the University of Massachusetts). You may want to meet with university librarians and find out what they are doing to preserve confidentiality; you can also organize a forum with librarians focusing on Section 215 and Section 505 of the USA PATRIOT Act.
4. Do outreach to foreign students to find out how they are affected by post 9-11 visa and SEVIS (Student/Exchange Visitor Information System) requirements and (in the case of students from 25 mainly Arab and Muslim countries) the Special Registration exit requirement – if they fail to register when leaving the country they can be barred re-entry. Collect and publicize stories of unfair treatment of foreign students; protest the chilling effect of SEVIS on campus dissent.
5. Get involved in the national ACLU campaign against racial profiling and the post 9/11 ethnic and religious targeting of Arabs/Muslims. Use information from the ACLU's "A New Era of Discrimination" (available on www.aclu.org) to raise consciousness. Films such as "Persons of Interest," and "Unconstitutional: the War on Our Civil Liberties" can stimulate discussion/action.
6. Work with the ACLU of Massachusetts on its "Restore the Rule of Law" Campaign – against warrantless domestic spying by the NSA, torture, rendition, and

secret detention. Help collect signatures on petitions, lobby elected officials, call talk shows, and write letters to the papers and articles for your campus paper.

7. Screen films in ACLU's "Freedom Files" series (see www.aclum.org). ACLUM can provide copies of the films and speakers.

Things to Remember When Undertaking Activities

- **Don't Bite off More Than You Can Chew.** When choosing an activity (especially your first activity) try to be certain it is something that your group has the capacity to do well. Putting on an organized and well-run event will make your group look good and increase the likelihood that people will want to be involved with it in the future.
- **Choose an Issue that Matters Most to the Most People.** A good way to attract students to your group is by choosing an issue that is deeply and widely felt by many different types of students.
- **Stay Focused.** The ACLU deals with many different issues – a new campus group should not. Working on too many things at once will spread your group thin and impede its growth. On the contrary, choosing one issue will give your organization focus and direction.
- **Have Fun.** All work and no play can ruin any organization. Be sure to make being part of your group fun.

What Can We Do for You?

- Provide your group with guidance from experienced organizers and ACLU employees
- Help arrange and locate speakers about pertinent ACLU topics
- Provide opportunities for group members as volunteers in the office, and can participate in our outreach to schools, to the public and other aspects of our work.
- Help network your group with other ACLU campus groups through the Student Zone section on the ACLU of Massachusetts website

Policies for Activities (legal stuff...)

As you know, the ACLU deals with a broad range of issues: free speech and assembly, freedom of the press, religious freedom, reproductive rights, GLBT rights, racial justice, privacy, freedom from unreasonable searches, due process, equal protection before the law, and much more. Student groups must take positions that are within ACLU policy and club leaders are advised to consult with the ACLU about their activities. Sometimes there are questions as to whether an activity falls within the ACLU's mission of defending the rights and protections extended by the Bill of Rights. There are many causes – such as organizing labor unions and opposing the war – that are not part of the ACLU's work.

Because improper use of the ACLU's name can cause damage to the institution's effectiveness and credibility, we ask you to check in with us before you launch a new project. In addition, as an ACLU student group, you are not authorized to do fund-raising using the name of the ACLU, or to make statements to the media on behalf of the ACLU beyond your campus newspaper. If you receive an inquiry from the media, you should discuss it with us as soon as possible.

All the work you undertake must be done on a non-partisan basis, as the ACLU does not endorse political parties or candidates, including in the context of student government.

We will ask you to submit reports on your activities for publication in our newsletter *The Docket*, and to publicize what you are doing on the soon-to-be developed Student Zone portion of our website: www.aclum.org/students/